

The Great Journey

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1. The Meeting

****Hello, everyone. This fic takes place one generation after the Human-Covenant War. The timeline diverges after Halo 3 and the Mass Effect galaxy is as if no humans had been there. Constructive reviews are welcome. Disclaimer:I own neither Mass Effect or Halo.****

****Now, without further ado, The Great Journey.****

Chapter 1

From the heavens, they are watching...

* * *

><p>Admiral Hackett marched down the magnificent hall of humanity's new capital, the awe inspiring Arcturus Station. The floor was smooth steel and the walls a similar color. The white light radiating from the ceiling provided a warm glow that lit the room, a human contrast of space's cold, dark enviroment. Hackett's brisk walk soon brought him to a window, providing a brilliant view of the mystery that is space. On another day he might have slowed down and taken a moment to admire humanity's accomplishment, but not today. Today, timing is crucial. Today, history can be made.<p>

The Sangheili will arrive at any moment. Is it truly possible that we can now break the haunting silence that covers us all? Is this the oppurtunity we need? I must seize it. I will not let the next generation suffer the unending dread mine has. I will not let our silence seperate us any longer. I will thaw this cold war.

Hackett continued his power walk to his destination. His stride demonstrated his authority, but also demonstrated his likeability.

Soldiers guarding the station in preparation for this day stood at attention as he walked by. He acknowledged their respect with a glance, and continued moving. Hackett was wearing the Navy's new uniform, blue with gold lining. He also had his trusty blue cap that looked as if it had come from the American Civil War. He looked rough, his face weary and covered with a gray beard. It was not the face of the young, cheerful person he once was. It was the face of a man who had seen war in all of it's brutality. He passed by several screens in the spacious hallway, relaying news and other information. Finally, after marching through the station he had found his destination. He walked into a hall containing several strong rooms used for important meetings. Certainly there was no more important a meeting than this.

The large metal door that stood between him and the meeting room was biometrically locked. Only a select few could make their way through. The 'dumb' AI scanned Hackett to confirm his identity.

"100% biometric match. Admiral Steven Hackett confirmed. You are authorized to use this room.", the AI said. Shortly after, the impenetrable door opened, and Hackett stepped inside.

Awaiting him were two Sangheili Fleetmasters, ONI Director Admiral Jack Harper and Admiral Anderson. As soon as he stepped inside the door closed behind him, as if it were locking him inside a den of lions. All five of them sat down at a mahogany table in the center of the room. A pitcher of ice water sat on the table, the ice cubes melting away. The most powerful people in the galaxy were in the room. It was reserved for them alone. No loyal lieutenants, not even an AI was allowed into this room. This was where the real decisions were made in the galaxy. They were the ones who make them. Even though power had been returned to the civillian human government, officially called the Systems Alliance, the UNSC still served as the military arm of humanity. It was their job to protect humanity and it's interests throughout the galaxy. That gave them considerable pull when it came to determining what those interests are. Now, it involved thawing a cold war with the Sangheili.

The tension in the room was palpable. Every one of them had fought during the Human-Covenant War. They all had their brushes with death. They all saw their friends get turned into a pile of blood and guts. Thousands on each side had died. Planets glassed. Children starved. Brothers carved as either heretics, or for depraved amusement. They knew better than anyone. They were the soldiers of that war. They knew the horrors of war. Perhaps fear of war is what drew these rivals together. Even after all this time, the resentment remained. For some, it was more than simple resentment, it was pure hatred.

And for this plan to succeed, a favor must be granted.

"Thanks you for coming, Fleetmasters. I appreciate that you have given us an audience.", Hackett said. He paused to take a look at his guests. Both gave him a cold stare, the same stare he'd seen hundreds of times before. The same stare that he saw when he crash landed onto Earth during the war.

"I'm sure you've had some idea about why I've called you here, so here it is: We need to see the Forerunner Artifact.", he said plainly. Hackett wasn't one to mince words.

"Never.", replied Haer' Vhokuree, one of the Sangheili Fleetmasters. The suppressed hatred could be felt in his voice. The Saurian creature was tall and imposing, his already intimidating physique augmented by the crimson armor he wore.

Alei'Lunjasse, the second Fleetmaster, was more inquisitive.

"What would you do if you if we allowed you access to the artifact?", asked Alei'. He was just as tall as Haer', but he chose a more ostentatious armor set, over laid with gold. He was uncomfortable in the leather chair, which clearly had not been designed for the raptor-esque aliens.

"We know what it does. We think we can use it.", replied Admiral Anderson. He leaned back in his chair and wiped the sweat from his bald forehead. He was the most recently promoted Admiral of the group. He was bald and black with a black buzzcut. He was in good shape for his age.

Alei' loosened up a bit, relaxing his shoulders and sitting back in his chair. Haer' did no such thing, tensing up at the words 'think we can use it'. A crack was beginning to form in the Sangheilli negotiators. Where there are cracks, there are opportunities for exploits.

"We understand your reluctance. We wouldn't expect you to allow us access without knowing what we know, so we'll fill you in.", said Hackett. He looked at Admiral Harper, forcing him to participate in the endeavor by educating their guests. Admiral Harper was the least enthusiastic about this meeting. Even though he was an expert at hiding his emotions and intentions-to be a good ONI member you had to- you could still see his wary feelings as he acted.

Harper, cool as an ice cube, participated with some reluctance. He put out his cigarette and pressed a button on his chair. A hologram appeared on the table. It depicted a large purple object orbiting a recently discovered Sangheili planet. There was a bright light-blue energy in the center with two rings spinning around it. The rest of the structure looked like a two-pronged fork with the spokes flattened out.

"ONI intelligence sweeps over the past month indicated that you had made a discovery. Obviously, we were concerned this was some unknown Forerunner superweapon or worse, another Halo. However, after studying our scans more thouroughly, we discovered that it was not a weapon but a means of transportation.",Admiral Harper said. He smiled on the inside.

Another example of human scientific superiority.

"How can this be a transportation device? Does it generate a slipspace portal?", asked Alei', now genuinly curious as to the nature of the artifact. He leaned forward, much more relaxed then his fellow Fleetmaster, Haer'.

The artifact was classified top secret. If they can find it, what else do they know about our contingencies? Operational Security is at risk., thought Haer'Vhokuree. He was the eternal soldier, always thinking about the mission.

"No, it does not. We were perplexed by this at first, but after further analyzing the energy source we discovered that it somehow lowers the mass of an object, sling shotting said object incredible distances. Whatever material is in the core of that artifact can reduce the mass of any object as long as there is sufficient energy flowing through it.", said Admiral Anderson. He was with Hackett no matter what.

_There is no need for these negotiations. We could simply send a stealth ship through without them knowing. What does Hackett have to gain from this?, _thought Admiral Jack Harper.

"Do you know what substance this is? How it works? Is it toxic?", asked Alei' in an attempt to probe the waters for information.

"No, we don't. All we have are the scans and simulations. If we had access to the artifact we could develop more conclusive results.", said Admiral Harper.

That was a blatant lie. UNSC scientists successfully created the substance, dubbed 'Element Zero', in a reactor. It was already being used in experimental tests on the latest SPARTAN IVs.

"I know you humans. You always ask for one thing and end up taking it and something else. What are you really after?", said Haer'Vhokuree in an aggressive tone.

Vhokuree had seen enough treachery in his life time. He'd been betrayed, left and right. The Jiralhanae, the Prophets, even fellow brothers during the Great Schism. Humans caused the collapse of his people. Memories still linger of fighting the humans on Reach. Nothing could erase the memory of watching his brothers fall as the demons shoved a shotgun into their head at point blank range. For all the bravado the Sangheili held with pride about how they do not fear death and how they are proud warriors, in reality they hated death as much as every other creature in the galaxy. They hated it because like all other life, they could not escape it.

Hackett intervened to soften the mood.

"We want to go through it. We want to see what is on the other side.", Hackett said in a manner becoming of his stern charm.

"Never!", exclaimed Haer'. "There could be anything on the other side. What if you find the Parasite? You humans will be the death of us all!".

"You're right, anything can be on the other side. That's why we must go. Stagnation is the death of innovation. We must explore.", Hackett said.

He looked around to gauge the Sangheili's reaction, something nigh impossible for a human to do. Idealism wasn't going to win them over. Not surprising, given their past. They've been won over by false prophets for too long. Time for a more pragmatic approach.

"I understand your reluctance. I'll sweeten the pot. We know that the poor crop from this year's harvest is causing famines in some of your

colonies. We are prepared to offer food and other aid in exchange for access to the artifact." Hackett took another look at their faces. Haer' still looked volatile and adamant in his decision, but you could see the cogs of Alei's Sangheili brain turning.

Crack exploited., thought Hackett.

After a moment's thought, Alei' made his decision.

"Very well. My ships will not oppose you when you arrive at the Artifact. You have my blessing.", said Alei'Lunjasse. Even the humans could see it was a difficult choice.

Haer' Vhokuree's expression went from hatred to shock and back to anger in the course of a second.

"Alei! What are you doing!", shouted Haer'. His fist was clenched.

"Humans, my friend and I need to talk in private. Would you give us a moment?", asked Alei calmly.

Understanding, the three admirals exited the room and entered the hallway. The Dumb AI opened the door as it scanned their biometrics.

"I'm not sure I like this Hackett. We shouldn't be telling these aliens so much.", said Admiral Harper. With his cybernetic eyes, it felt like he was staring into your soul. He was tall, had greying blond hair, and wore a black suit. Only he could get away with something like that. The Admiral was nicknamed "The Illusive Man" due to his secrecy.

"We need to see this Artifact. This is the best way to do it without risking an incident.", Hackett said.

Shouts could be heard from beyond the metal door-an incredible feat considering the room was designed to be sound proof. No one wanted to know what was really going on inside.

"You wouldn't call that an incident?", asked Admiral Jack Harper.

* * *

><p>"You cannot do this! My fleet will remain even if yours does not. I will not stand for human treachery.", Haer' shouted angrily. He got up from his seat.<p>

Alei' remained calm in a manner that only a warrior poet such as himself could. He was known for his patience accross Sanghelios-a useful trait when dealing with his hot headed friend.

"Haer', they're offering aid to our colonies. We are still weak from our dependance on the Prophets. We cannot produce enough food to feed both Sanghelios and our colonies. If there is famine, there will be revolts. We don't have sufficient force to put down a rebellion and secure our borders. As far as I am concerned, accepting their offer is preferable to mass starvation."

Alei had always been the more rational of the two. They had fought

together in the war, and had been side by side ever since. He was cold and calculated, Haer was fast and aggressive. Now, however, they were not at war. Now, it was time for peace. Haer' had proven time and again that he was stuck there, as if he couldn't leave the past behind. Which is one reason Alei'Lunjasse had stuck with him all these years.

"But what if it's a trick! We know these humans. Their trickery surpasses even the Kig-Yar!", said Haer.

Alei did the Sangheili equivalent of a sigh and sat down. They were relics from a past era, and this conversation was proving it.

"Haer', this isn't the war. We are no longer the military arm of the once mighty Covenant. I won't let your unwillingness to let go of the past dishonor the Sangheili. We face starvation if we don't accept, and you know it. It was why we came in the first place. Don't let your bitter rage put our people in jeopardy.", replied Alei'Lunjasse.

Alei always knew what to say. Haer' couldn't deny his argument, he knew it was right. It would be a dishonor to both his ancestors and his people to watch them starve because of a grudge. Furthermore, if the humans were trying to harm them, they could easily destroy their remaining crops and watch them starve to death.

"Fine. I will allow them passage. But they must first provide the aid they promise.", said Haer'Vhokuree with resentment in his voice.

* * *

><p>Fifteen minutes had passed since the Fleetmasters asked to talk in private. Suddenly, it seemed calm. The Admirals were slightly startled when the metal door opened. They halted their casual conversation and turned around as an alien stepped out.<p>

"We have made a decision.", Alei said. No one knew what to expect.

The admirals stepped inside and took a seat at the wooden table. The Fleetmasters were there to meet them.

"We have both decided to allow you access to the Artifact. However, we have conditions.", said Alei'Lunjasse in a diplomatic tone.

There are always conditions, thought Admiral Harper.

"First, you must send your aid before we allow access. Second, any military ship you send through the artifact must be no larger than a frigate, and no more than five at a time. Third, we will have no part of this expedition. Other than access to the artifact, we will not provide any support once you are on the other side. Those are our conditions.", said Alei'Lunjasse.

The Admirals looked at Hackett to make a move. Hackett took a moment to contemplate the possibilities. He could certainly push for more, but that might go down hill. He had what he wanted.

"Very well, we accept your terms. Our supply ships are heading your way. Just tell them what to do. And I expect them back in one piece.", said Admiral Hackett.

"Our ships will lift the blockade so long as you follow our terms. Thank you for the support.", said Alei. Haer' grunted.

"Gentlemen, thank you for the audience. I hope this will be the beginning of a long and profitable relationship between our peoples.", said Hackett as he showed them the way out.

This is how history is made. Maybe this can end the cold war. I am making history. ,thought Hackett as he watched his colleagues exit the room. He froze for a moment to ponder the implications.

But what kind of history am I making?

Well, there you have it. Chapter 1 of the Great Journey. I promise things will have more action later, so bear with me. Also, I am looking for a beta reader. I find it difficult to find crossover betas, so if you're interested send me a PM.

2. The Commander

Thanks for the feedback everyone. I will continue writing this story as long as I have ideas. Reviews are welcome.

Disclaimer: I own neither Halo or Mass Effect.

Chapter 2

"Well, what about Shepard? Earthborn, but no record of his family.", Senator Udina said. He was tall, had balding gray hair and always seemed to wear a frown on his face. He wore a sharp white coat that looked as if it were a lab coat-suit hybrid.

The Admirals were sitting in a conference room similar to that of their previous meeting, planning the details of the mission. Sitting at the round metal table, they looked through the dossiers of possible mission leaders. Unfortunately, the Senator had asked to tag along. Since the rise of the Systems Alliance, all major military operations had to be okayed by the President. He was the new Commander and Chief.

Udina, for all his faults, was the perfect man to sell it to him and the representatives. Without his blessing, the mission would never make it past the planning stage. Of all the fruits of peace, giving power back to the civilian government was certainly the most bitter for the military. Before, they could do anything they wanted. Their word was law. They still had considerable influence, but now they had to run every major operation through the obstructive bureaucracy of the civilian government. Never the less, it was better than knowing a Covenant fleet was coming to turn your planet into glass. At the very least, Hackett and Anderson had managed to convince him to support the project. There were more than a few politicians that would rather build a bubble around the Alliance and ignore the rest of the galaxy forever. Of course, Hackett knew the dangers of living on borrowed time, so this mission was a way of confronting the future without stepping on toes.

Admiral Hackett frowned a bit at the mention of Shepard. He was one of the more well known SPARTAN IVs, being exclusive to ONI's N7 program. Hackett didn't trust anything that ONI was involved in. The spooks already had more than enough toys to play with. They didn't need their own SPARTANs. ONI's budget was higher than the standard military's, and that was dangerous. Hackett kept bringing up the dangers of giving ONI so much power, but his concerns usually fell on deaf ears. Regardless, ONI should have as little control as possible in this mission. The Illusive Man had an infamous reputation for playing his cards close to his vest. He could blind side you at any moment. Not the most trustworthy organization. It was inevitable that they got involved in the mission, but it's best to make sure they have minimal power in it.

"He got most of his unit killed on Torfan.", Hackett replied in an attempt to discredit him. He made no attempt to hide wary thoughts.

Anderson, on the other hand, expressed support. He had seen Shepard in action, and knew he was capable. For jobs like this, you needed someone as good as him. He had experience, unlike many of the candidates for this mission. He could connect with Shepard. He'd served on a ship once, and he knew that you had to be ready for anything, because anything could be out there. There might be lost Forerunner artifacts, a new alien species, a powerful civilization, natural phenomenon, anything. That's who Shepard is. The man who is ready for anything.

"He gets the job done. No matter the cost."

Udina frowned. He was a pessimist, and seeing the negative side effects of such a person. Then again, if this mission did not succeed he would be in hot water. Negotiations with the Sangheili might go south in a very bad way. He would be replaced in a heart beat. The public wouldn't care how the mission was accomplished, all they need to know is that it was a success. With that success, he could possibly ascend to higher office. Maybe even a cabinet position? He reconsidered.

No doubt he uses some, mildly-unethical tactics, but he won't fail me. He's perfect for the job.

Still, he needed to know what the others were thinking. A good politician always makes sure he knows what his allies' thoughts are. The easiest way to find this is to ask a question.

"Is that the kind of person we want exploring this new galaxy?", asked Udina while feigning dislike.

Anderson was quick to stand to Shepard's defense. They had worked together once before, and Shepard was a protege' of his. Despite using some tactics Anderson despises, Shepard was still a valuable asset to the UNSC. If anyone could handle the galaxy beyond that artifact, it was Shepard.

"That's the only kind of person who can explore that galaxy.", responded Anderson.

Udina was satisfied with the response and lifted his frown, if only

by a little.

"I'll make the call.", said Udina.

****_UNSC NORMANDY_****

The ONI Prowler class vessel _Normandy_ dropped out of slipspace just outside of the Sol System. Even though human slipspace drives had improved drastically since the war, it was still law to leave slipspace just outside the system and move in with impulse drives. After what happened to New Mombasa during the war, lawmakers were afraid a similar event might happen again if ships launched near atmosphere. The Normandy began it's approach towards Earth.

Joker piloted the ONI stealth vessel with skilled unmatched by other humans, despite his disability. He carefully paid attention to the ship's instruments, monitoring all the factors of the Normandy's flight. The ship's AI could handle this task, but Joker was just as good and his skill freed the AI to do more useful things.

"Impulse emissions...check, Navigation...check, Slipspace radiation scrubbers engaged. All systems online. Drift...just under 1500k.", said Joker as he checked his instruments.

Finally back home., thought Jeff "Joker" Moreau. He was wearing a blue UNSC Navy jumpsuit with a matching navy blue baseball cap. The jumpsuit was standard for for all crew members on a navy ship. He had a mustache and a slight beard.

They were nearing Neptune.

The Commander is going to chew me out if I don't wake him up in time.

"EDI, wake the Commander up.", ordered Joker.

A blue holographic ball with a vertical mouth appeared on a pad nearby. Of course, that wasn't really the AI's "location", so much as an image for humans to interact with. The AI was actually throughout the entire ship, micro managing everything from life support to engineering. Normally, the ship would have a crew to help manage these things, but with N7 missions the fewer people know the better it is for everyone. The crew consisted of Joker, EDI, and Shepard.

"Very well, Jeff. Defrosting the Commander's cryo pod now."

****_Normandy Cryo Chamber**_**

The cryo pod depressurized as the hatch lifted, revealing the Commander. Warmth slowly refilled his body as he woke. Confusion filled his mind when he opened his eyes, but it was quickly contained. His body ached from the stress of his previous mission. Going solo had some disadvantages. Even a SPARTAN has it's limits. Shepard pushed himself out of his pod using his super human strength.

He was already in his N7 Spec MJOLNIR VII armor, which was the newest version of the famous MJOLNIR armor. The SPARTAN IV armor was a new

generation of the MJOLNIR, designed to be easier to mass produce while providing the same benefits as the original version. Due to recent technological discoveries made from technology found at a Forerunner Dyson Sphere, the UNSC finally found a way to mass produce MJOLNIR armor and in effect provide a way to mass produce SPARTAN IVs. A new material could be synthesized to replace the Reactive Metal Crystal Layer, which accounts for eighty percent of a MJOLNIR suit's cost. It is cheaper to use the synthesized version, which drastically reduced the cost to make MJOLNIR and by extension SPARTANS. Combined with recent advances in cybernetics, anyone could be a SPARTAN IV as long as they had the fighting spirit and the will to sacrifice a cushy civilian life for the grueling life of a SPARTAN.

Shepard remembered making that choice. He remembered walking into a UNSC recruitment center off the streets, with nothing but the clothes on his back and a will to escape from a life on the street. He wasn't sure what that recruiter saw in him, but he let Shepard in anyway. It took six years of pain, sweat and evaluations, but he was finally chosen for the SPARTAN IV program. Like many SPARTAN IVs he was plucked right out of the ODSs. Two more years of cybernetic augmentations and training, and he was finally ready for his first suit of MJOLNIR armor.

To a SPARTAN, armor is more than just a tool. It's a part of you. When you put on that armor and you become a real SPARTAN, you become someone else. Whoever you were before died and has been replaced. Shepard the gang member died the day he donned that armor. Shepard the SPARTAN had come to take his place. That is the sacrifice of a SPARTAN, to shed your past self and become a war machine.

Shepard exited the pod and stretched his arms, shaking off the last of the cryo sleep's side effects. Shepard was 6ft 10'', white and had a black buzzcut. His skin was very pale, like most SPARTANS. The living war machine took a quick look around, a habit all soldiers develop. His cybernetic implants granted him reaction speed beyond that of an average human, so he had little to fear if someone tried to get the jump on him. He had a very high IQ, and his brain was filled with all the tactical knowledge a soldier could ask for. He certainly was a genius bruiser. For all the similarities he had with his brethren, Shepard was unique in that he had a more ruthless reputation. That's why he was usually reserved for jobs that they could not afford to fail. They sent him to fix problems, no matter what it cost. So he did.

"Welcome back, Shepard. You might like to know that in your absence I have seized control of the ship and are holding you hostage. Muwahahaha!", EDI said over the speakers.

"Knock it off, EDI. I want a sitrep and I want it now.", ordered Shepard.

EDI's spherical avatar entered the room.

"That was a joke.", said EDI picking up where she left off. "We are currently on route to Earth for scheduled repairs and for debriefing on your previous mission.", answered EDI.

The Admirals will probably want to debrief me themselves. Might as well look presentable.

Shepard walked out of the cryo pod chambers and entered the dark, blue tinted hallways of the Normandy. It was a military ship through and through, complete with the dimly lit rooms and the red alarms in case the situation became dire.

Shepard walked through the hallway, each step radiating authority and ruthless skill. His very presence had intimidated many into submission. He could be very...persuasive if he had to be. Few wanted to mess with a SPARTAN, and those who did usually regretted it.

After a short march accross the metal grated floor, Shepard reached the armory. The walls were covered with every weapon or device a SPARTAN could need, including a place to store his MJOLNIR armor and his trusty M6D pistol. Shepard stepped onto a platform in the center of the room and let the ship's armor removal system go to work taking off his heavy MIOLNIR armor. Two arms descended from the ceiling and began removing the armor, meticulously stripping each piece till nothing but the mesh undersuit remained.

Shepard then stepped back into the hallway and procceeded to the elevator, stepping inside and pressing the top floor button where his quarters were. The elevator moved slowly, even though the Normandy was a small ship.

Note to self: Make sure to have a faster elevator installed upon return to Earth.

Once in his quarters, he took off his mesh undersuited and dawned his "Alliance blues" uniform, named for it's blue color and gold lining. His signified his rank as a full Commander, a title well earned. He could take a shower, but it would be redundant since the MJIONIR is actually comfy enough to keep you clean while it is dawned. He then took a seat at his desk, anticipating the Admirals' call to him and ask for a debrief. They were an impatient bunch, but rightly so when the civies are breathing down their necks.

A minute later his prediction came true.

"Commander, you've recieved a call from the UNSC. They want to talk in the meeting room.", said EDI over the loudspeaker.

"Alright. Ready the holographic communications array.", said Shepard as he rose from his chair.

After a short walk and another agonizing ride down the elevator, Shepard reached the meeting room. The room was dimly lit like the rest of the ship, and it's only furnishing consisted of a wooden table with a glass center. The table descended into the floor and Shepard stepped onto it's previous location while the room went completely dark.

A holographic image of the Illusive Man then appeared in the room. Shepard stood at attention, his hand in a firm salute.

"At ease, SPARTAN.", the Illusive Man said. He was calmly lounging in his chair in some unknown room with a red star behind him, a glass of alchcohol in a cupholder and a cigarette in his left hand.

"I trust the errand we sent you on has been completed?", asked the ONI Director despite already knowing the answer.

"Yes. The last known Insurrectionist terrorist cell on Venezia has been crushed.", stated Shepard matter-of-factly.

"Good. I'm afraid your full report will have to wait. We have a new mission for you, and it is vital to the human race.", said The Illusive Man. He then proceeded to fill the Commander in on the new Forerunner artifact and the mission that was planned.

_A satillite capable of sending someone to another galaxy?
Mysterious. I think I like the sound of this already._

"We decided that it would be unwise for you to go this one alone. You need to pick a team. I've forwarded some dossiers on people I think you might find useful.", said the Illusive Man.

Clever. He's trying to inject himself further into the mission by affecting the decision making process. Nice try.

If you work for ONI long enough, you develop a sense of paranoia for these things. Not to mention that despite working for ONI, Shepard still didn't trust it's director.

"I appreciate the thought, but I'll pick my own team members. You just give me the intel.", said Shepard.

The Illusive Man could tell his play had been seen through.

"Very well, but I insist on you bringing Miranda Lawson. She's been involved in most of our projects involving element zero. Her experience will be invaluable on this mission.", said the Illusive Man.

Typical Illusive Man. Package a spy in an offer you can't refuse.

"Fine, she can come. But I choose the rest.", Shepard said.

The ONI Director nodded his head and put out his cigarette. With that, the meeting was over. Shepard took a deep breath and exited the room.

Shepard walked back to the elevator and took the lift up to his cabin. With a few heavy steps, he finally reached his desk with a holopad waiting to greet him.

"EDI, send me dossiers on SPARTAN IVs. I'll also need dossiers for a doctor with military experience."

Time to recruit.

****As you can see, I've chosen to use Renegade Shepard. Before some of you stop reading, let me explain my reasoning.****

****This Shepard comes from the Halo universe. A universe where they kidnap kids and turn them into super soldiers. A universe where the scars left by a genocidal war with aliens can still be felt. Paragon Shep would be too idealistic, to the point of him being utterly naive**

in the context of Halo. A Shepard born into this enviroment would be cold and cynical, not warm and idealistic. So look at it from that point of view.**

For you action junkies, stick around and I promise we'll get to some action scenes soon. Just be patient with me.

For those of you interested in what Shepard's armor looks like, he wears the armor in the link below. It just has the red-black-gray color scheme Mass Effect's N7 armor has. Remove spaces in link to visit site.

[http:// halo. wikia. com /wiki/ SPARTAN-IV_Program](http://halo.wikia.com/wiki/SPARTAN-IV_Program)

3. The Plan

Thanks for the feedback everyone!

Disclaimer: I own neither Halo or Mass Effect

**Earth UNSC Orbital Shipyards**

Shepard walked towards the bridge in full armor, save his helmet. Since he was going to Earth, he didn't really have to wear it. It was personal preference. When you wear something like that long enough, it becomes a part of you. You feel naked without it. Most SPARTANS felt the same way, and Shepard was no exception. With each heavy step, Shepard thought about his upcoming task. It wasn't often command offered him a choice about who was coming with him on a mission. With oppurtunities like this, you have to strike while the iron is hot. There is no guarentee that the right people will still be available. Not to mention he was stuck with Miranda Lawson, the Illusive Man's personal hand in the mission.

Shepard went over her file in his head. A significant portion of her personel file had been blacked out, even the one he got EDI to hack into the system for. He needed to know how to break her in the event that her loyalties became conflicted. She had to serve him, not the Illusive Man.

Miranda Lawson

No known mother, presumed to be genetically engineered by her father, **REDACTED.** Recruited to ONI by _**REDACTED.**_ _Augmented with element zero at the Illusive Man's request. Highly intelligent, excellent physical consitution, probably from genetic engineering. Heals faster than the average human. Could have been a a SPARTAN, but turned the offer down to become an agent of the Illusive Man._

Psych Profile

Mildly arrogant and detatched, almost to a sociopathic level. Lack of emotional attachement indicates lack of friends in childhood, which is a known cause of detachment. Very manipulative. Sees others as tools rather than people.

She was a real piece of work. She no doubt drank the Illusive Man's cool aid long ago, reinforced by the fact that he was probably the

only person she really trusted. Breaking her was going to be difficult at least.

There is always the contingency plan., thought Shepard as he took a glance at his M6C/SOCOM sidearm. He'll have to deal with her later. Right now, the important thing is to pick his team, and to pick them well.

I need three people. One tough guy, someone who has been weathered both physically and mentally. Someone who can take punishment even another SPARTAN couldn't. I need a walking tank, and this guy must serve that purpose. Next, I need someone with a fighting spirit beyond that of any other. I need someone who will follow me to the gates of hell and beyond. Finally, I need one of the newer element zero augmented SPARTANs in case things don't go well with Miranda.

After a lengthy walk accross the dimly lit ship, Shepard arrived at the bridge.

"Good timing Commander, I was just about to bring us into the space station. See that taxpayer money at work.", Joker said with his usual wise guy attitude.

"Station control, this is UNSC Normandy. Requesting permission to land.", he said into the comms. Odd how he is always formal when doing that.

"Stand by for clearance Normandy.", an operator said over the comms. For a brief second, he cut out. A second later he called again.

"Clearance granted. You may begin your approach. Transferring you to an ONI operator.", said the control. He must have seen that the Normandy's codes indicated an ONI Prowler, in which case it was standing operating procedure to let them handle these affairs.

"Normandy, this is ONI Tower. Please land at docking bay 22.", said another voice.

Joker expertly weaved through the traffic surrounding the station and landed in the appropriate docking bay. This was slightly easier than normal due to low traffic in Earth's orbit.

An airlock extended and connected to the Normandy's existing one, providing a tunnel into the station. An airlock then caught the Normandy, serving as a kind of drydock for the ship.

Shepard stepped into the gray colored tunnel and walked towards the end. Once the short journey was complete, the door on the other end was opened and Shepard stepped out. Black uniformed ONI Operatives were ready to greet him. Not a surprising sight since this was an ONI-only dock. However, what was surprising was to see a few UNSC Marines here. ONI would never let another branch of the military onto their docks for fear of revealing sensitive information, especially a black ops vessel such as the Normandy. What's going on?

A minute later the answer appeared in the form of Admiral Hackett, guarded by ten or so UNSC Marines. Hackett was wearing his usual

uniform, complete with the hat that looked like it belonged on a Union soldier. Shepard had heard of him before, but had never met him in person.

Hackett was a veteran from the Human-Covenant War like most Admirals. As the successor to Admiral Lord Hood, he had some big shoes to fill. At first, some thought he didn't have what it takes to be Admiral of the Fifth Fleet, humanity's largest and greatest fighting force comprised of veteran officers and the latest technology. However, time had proved them wrong and Hackett had proven to be every bit as capable as his predecessor.

It certainly was an honor to meet the man, but what was he doing here? Only one way to find out.

Shepard walked towards the Admiral and held his hand to his forehead in a firm salute.

"At ease, SPARTAN.", Admiral Hackett said in a stern but calm manner.

Shepard dropped his hand to his side, keeping the firm expression of a SPARTAN on his face.

"Let's take a walk.", Hackett said in a tone a father would use with his son.

Shepard and Hackett walked into the hallway of the station, leaving his bodyguards behind. Shepard remained silent for a while, waiting for Hackett to talk first. After a minute or so, their casual walk across the station took them to a private observation lounge containing a poker table and a large window giving a look into the darkness of space.

Once there, Shepard's patience paid off.

"Sometimes I think people forget how incredible all this really is.", Hackett said, breaking the ice with his fatherly tone. Shepard waited for more.

"I come up here sometimes to remind myself of the incredible events that took us here.", said Hackett.

"Space?", Shepard fished.

"This room represents more than space, Shepard. While it might not be as good an analogy as Arcturus Station, it still represents more than our rise into space. It represents unity. The first time humanity stepped into space was in the 1960s. It was the product of two world powers trying to outcompete each other in a race to the stars. We had nuclear weapons pointed at each other, ready to blow each other up. Yet our spirit of competition eventually drove one country to ruin and another to glory. This was the price of peace.", Hackett said.

Shepard paused, trying to figure out what this cryptic lecture was about. A million questions filled his head.

"Now, years and years later, we have a united government. Not out of idealism, but out of fear that our security will again be

compromised, from within or from without.", Hackett continued, leading Shepard.

"Shepard, we're repeating that same war the Soviet Union fought with the USA. Humans and the Sangheili may have stopped fighting but we are far from at peace. They are are not down for the count as many like to believe. That was proven by the rogue faction that attacked Feh1 Prime. They may be behind in scientific and manufacturing expertise but their homeworld is covered in Forerunner artifacts and they have more expertise in war than we have by a long shot. We need to bury them before they get us. That's the only thing that can thaw this Cold War. It took a willingness to compete, and a drive to victory for peace to finally occur and end the First Cold War. It will take the same to win this one.", he said.

"Shepard, when you go through that artifact you aren't doing it simply because of exploration. Your starting something. We're at the starting point of a race, a race that will drive one of us to ruin and another to glory. It's up to you to decide who wins. I know you'll make us proud.", finished Hackett.

That explains everything. It explains why Hackett would go to such great lengths to do something so risky. It explains why he would risk confronting the Sangheili. It would explain the extra leeway to pick the team. It explains why he would summon the courage to deal with Udina.

Clearly I underestimated him.

It's Hackett's ultimate plan, and a clever one too. Force the Sangheili into a race they cannot win. Drive them to ruin, lift us to glory. It explains everything, except one thing.

"Why me? There are other people who could handle this. What made me stick out?", asked Shepard.

Hackett put his hands behind his back and looked at Shepard.

"I'll admit that I wasn't too impressed when I first looked at your file. Many good men died on Torfan. For another mission I might not have picked you. However, what you did at Torfan told me one very important thing about you: You will do whatever it takes to win. I need someone like that. I need someone who will go the extra mile and do anything to secure victory. I need you.", he said.

That wasn't enough. There is more, there has to be.

"There are plenty of people like that in the N7 Program. You could have picked someone like Kai Leng. Why me? Why put me in charge of this?", Shepard said.

Hackett looked at Shepard and explained further.

"Looking at your mission on Torfan, I saw more than a simple soldier or even a SPARTAN in the making.

Shepard, let me tell you something I've had to learn the hard way. You can pay a soldier to fire a gun. You can pay a soldier to have him take a hill. But you can't pay a soldier to believe. When you went up against the stronger Insurrectionist forces on Torfan, there

was no good reason to think you would win. Not even a SPARTAN could take that many, even with a squad. But your men didn't seem to care-they went along anyway, even at the cost of their lives. Why? Because they believed in you.

That is what I need now. A symbol for humanity to believe in. A symbol that will compel others to finish the race just as you will. Where we're taking the human race can get hairy and I know you're the symbol that will get us through to the other side.", said Admiral Hackett.

Realizing the implications of being raised up as a symbol, Shepard shook his head.

"Sir, with all due respect, I'm not John-117. I'm not a hero that can carry humanity through it's darkest hour. I do the things I do because I have to win. Without me, people couldn't sleep at night. I do the things that others wouldn't dare touch. I'm hardly a heroic figure.", said Shepard.

"Deep down, we all want to win. You may not be John-117, but like him you were born for victory. You're exactly who we need. When you go through that artifact, you're going to start a race. I know that you're going to win. You're going to be the first person to travel to another galaxy. Humanity will rally behind you the same way they did Neil Armstrong when he stepped foot on the moon. And the Sangheili will have nothing.", concluded Hackett.

Shepard nodded, finally agreeing to take part in Hackett's master plan. The Sangheili didn't have the same resources humanity did. Forcing them into a scientific race would ruin them economically and socially, leaving humans as the victor. It was bold. It was daring. It was cunning. It was perfect for Shepard.

"Now, go pick your team. Don't tell anyone of this meeting.", said Hackett.

"Yes sir.", said Shepard.

Shepard walked across the station. This particular station is one of the many orbital defense weapon platforms surrounding Earth. Most of the old MAC cannons had been replaced by particle wave cannons, humanity's strongest energy weapon. It could slice through a fully shielded carrier with ease. The downside is that powerful energy weapons like these needed time to charge up, leaving the station and Earth vulnerable. This was why they are supplemented with kinetic energy rail guns. It doubled as an orbital shipyard, so it also had plentiful fighter support.

After a brief stroll, Shepard went back into the hangar to check on the Normandy. Joker was outside.

I ordered him to stay on the ship till I got back.

Beside him stood his old mentor, Admiral Anderson.

Shepard began his swift approach towards Joker, like a drill sergeant preparing to reprimand his cadets.

"Joker, I thought I ordered you stay on the Normandy until my meeting

was over.", Shepard said sternly.

"It's okay, Shepard. The Normandy is currently in for maintenance and upgrades. I let him off the ship.", explained Admiral Anderson. He was wearing his full Admiral uniform, complete with gold lining and badges, many he must have earned during the Human-Covenant War.

Shepard lifted a rare smile at the sight of his old mentor.

"Admiral Anderson, it's good to see you again. How does it feel to be in the big leagues?", asked Shepard in reference to his promotion.

"Not as good as some think. There's more politics at this level than military, but that's to be expected.", Anderson said.

"So I heard you were having the Normandy upgraded. I can't say it's a bad idea, you never know what's on the other side. Still, I need my ship back so I can start looking for recruits.", said Shepard.

"No worries Shepard. The shipyard is working overtime. The Normandy should be prepped and ready to go in five hours. In the mean time I kept your quarters here on the station in case you needed to rest.", said Anderson.

"This is an outrage! You would let me in if I were military!", shouted a voice in the back of the hanger.

Senator Udina was shaking his fist at two ONI guards who were preventing his entry into the dock.

What is he doing all the way out here?,_ thought Shepard.

"Let him in agents. He's with me.", shouted Shepard.

The guards promptly stepped aside and allowed Udina access to the dock. He was wearing a white suit with a blue turtle neck under it with white pants.

"This better be good, Udina. You don't have clearance to be on this dock.", Shepard said sternly.

Udina did one of his famous frowns and explained.

"I managed to get the political support we need for the mission. The toughest part was winning over the Terra Firma Party, but I think we've convinced them that the reward is worth the risk.", said Udina.

"Good. In that case all that remains is for Shepard to pick his team. I'll let you get to work on that. Good luck Shepard.", said Admiral Anderson.

Udina nodded as well and they both left. Joker limped forward after they left with a chip in his hand.

"I managed to swipe EDI before leaving the ship. I figured she might be useful.", he said.

Shepard took her and they all headed up to his quarters.

* * *

><p>Five hours had nearly gone by, consisting of Shepard at his desk with EDI while Joker read magazines. Shepard continued to look over the dossiers EDI had downloaded while on the Normandy, carefully scanning each one for the people he needed to complete the mission.<p>

"You know, why can't you just ask for a battalion of regular marines?", asked Joker.

"Regular marines aren't what I need for this mission. I need people who I can count on. People who are loyal to me. Besides, if there is an alien race on the other side of that artifact a heavy military presence might be interpreted as a hostile act. We need people who can fight like a battalion of marines.", responded Shepard.

He had combed through a seemingly endless amount of dossiers. The ship would be ready soon, and he couldn't wait forever. Still, having the right people were essential.

Shepard was about to go back to the Normandy when some files caught his eye. Shepard took a closer look at them, and found the perfect group of people to accompany him on his mission.

Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams

Born on Sirona, Ashley Williams comes from a military family. Her father and grandfather were both in the military. Her childhood was filled with military life, moving from deployment to deployment with her father, an ODST. Her grandfather surrendered the colony world Shanxi to the Covenant during the Human-Covenant War, a source of much contention among her family. She enlisted in the military out of highschool. Her first deployment was at Eden Prime, where she defeated a superior force of insurrectionest looking to nuke the colony. After this she was drafted into the SPARTAN IV Program. Completed Orbital Combat Training aboard the Rakesh Sharma Orbital Training Platform above Earth. Currently training further on Pinnacle Station.

Psych Profile

Aggressive. Will speak her mind, but will follow orders if given. She relies on instincts more than plans. Adapts to combat situations easily.

An overlooked, underappreciated soldier that could use some real action.

I'll take her.

It didn't take long for Shepard to reach the next dossier he was interested in.

Staff Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko

_Joined the UNSC and was quickly noticed. Due to his genetic potential he was allowed into the SPARTAN IV Program. After Element

Zero was synthesized, ONI wanted to augment SPARTAN soldiers with it, but this process required the right genetics to work. Kaidan fit the requirements and volunteered for the BAaT Program where he was augmented with element zero. He is currently training further at Pinnacle Station._

Psych Profile

An idealist in nature. He joined the UNSC because he wanted to fight for a cause, and is willing to go to great lengths to see that cause succeed. It is likely that he values his cause more than his own life.

Another good pick. He has to come.

Shepard scanned a couple more, and finally found the last piece of his team.

James Vega

Joined UNSC at Camp Pendleton. First major deployment at Feh1 Prime. Covenant Loyalists attacked the Colony. He was sent to secure vital intel on the Loyalists and get it off planet, at the cost of both his team and thousands of civillian lives. He joined the SPARTAN IV Program afterwards and specialized in heavy weapons and shields. Currently on Pinnacle Station.

Psych Profile

He feels some guilt about leaving his comrades behind on Feh1 Prime, and is eager to get past it.

And there is the heavy weapon expert. He's been through mental and physical punishment. Tough as nails.

These are the people he needs to go through the artifact. They're tough, powerful, smart, and ready.

EDI then called over the intercom.

"Commander, the Normandy is ready for departure.", she said.

"I'm on my way.", Shepard said.

After a few minutes walk, Shepard reached the dock. Joker had beaten him down and was already aboard the ship.

The Prowler-class Corvette _Normandy _came out of the docking bay and was already in orbit with the airlock ready to recieve the Commander.

The ship was incredible. It was tough and utilitarian, but it was amazing none the less. It was black, clearly designed to blend into outerspace. A few glowing blue turrets on the outside, no doubt pulse laser cannons. Underneath the nose of the nose of the ship was an energy cannon, the latest in the Directed Energy Weapon series. Two more impulse thrusters had been attatched to the "wings" of the ship, allowing it even faster impulse speeds.

Shepard made a mental note to look over the full upgrade list once he

was on board.

With that, he stepped into the airlock and retired to his quarters while Joker took them out of the system and into the darkness of space.

Shepard took this time to look over the new upgrades. Besides the new Directed Energy Cannon that had been built into the ship, four missile pods had been added. Two pulse lasers had been added to supplement the DEC. For point defense there are the automated Gauss Cannons. The shields had been upgraded using Cyclonic Energy Shielding derived directly from Forerunner technology. Heavier ship armor had also been installed. That was in addition to the existing stealth technology.

It was impressive set up. Shepard was commanding a corvette that could fight like a destroyer at the very least, and at most a small battleship.

Shepard then went back down his new, faster elevator to the bridge.

Time to continue with the rest of my journey.

Shepard continued his march towards the bridge, moving with a purpose he didn't have before coming here. He arrived at the bridge just as the Normandy left the Sol System.

"Where to Commander?", asked Joker.

"Take us to Pinnacle Station."

I tossed a little plot thickener into this chapter's recipe since I figured the pacing was getting a little slow. I'll try to make something happen soon. Bear with me. Stick around everyone, soon it's gonna get interesting...

4. The Test

Thanks for sticking with me so far everyone! Your feedback is much appreciated.

Disclaimer: I do not own Halo or Mass Effect.

**UNSC Normandy**

Shepard sat at his desk, reviewing all the information about his soon-to-be crew. Others might have gone and worked out or took a cryo nap, but not Shepard. He needed to know his crew better than they knew themselves. This could only be achieved by careful study and, eventually, interaction. When you go into a combat zone, you need people you can trust. He needed these SPARTANs to trust him. Vega would be easy enough, he is ready for anything that would take his mind off of Feh1 Prime. Ashley is a fighter, eager to prove herself worthy of the title SPARTAN. Kaidan might take a little convincing, but it should be easy enough to convince him that this cause is worth fighting for. Miranda is the real problem. She is firmly in the Illusive Man's pocket and would without a doubt betray everyone if she thought necessary.

The journey to Pinnacle Station by slipstream was only a few hours, so he had a little time to think over things. In the past this journey would have taken days, but after the war was over and the Forerunner Dyson Sphere was discovered, slipspace technology had improved tremendously. It wasn't so much new technology as much as it was a better understanding of slipspace. Slipspace is a series of eleven dimensions that alter the laws of physics for those inside it. This can be used to accelerate an object to faster than light speeds. Translight engines provide a way for a ship to enter these dimensions.

The early ventures into slipspace technology were marred with errors. The first slipspace translight engine humanity used was the Shaw-Fujikawa translight engine. It allowed entry into slipspace, but it was slow and you could end up anywhere. The result was that it took much longer to get from one place to another than the Covenant, which spelled disaster for many UNSC attacks.

That all changed when the Forerunner Dyson Sphere was found. Library after library of Forerunner data, some of which is still being deciphered, was found. Thanks to the technology found there, humans had taken the Covenant's place as the most powerful civilization in the galaxy. Modern ships could hit a target the size of a pinhead on the other side of the galaxy. Ships could move faster in slipspace than ever before. Even computer technology had changed, leading to creations like EDI. Humanity was forever changed the moment that sphere was discovered. The Human race had risen once again to its rightful place as the head of the galaxy, just as it had nearly been thousands of years ago according to a Forerunner library log that was found.

The Reclaimers have indeed reclaimed. Now all that stands between Human domination of the galaxy is the Sangheili, and with Hackett's plan they will fall just as the Covenant fell before them. However, that isn't Shepard's job. His job is to start a race. Just like every other job, it will get done.

„Let's just hope this mission doesn't cost as much as Torfan.“, thought Shepard.

That particular mission still ate at his soul every now and then. Sometimes sacrifices had to be made for the sake of the mission, but Torfan's price was high. Too high, even for Shepard. Sure, the military backbone of the Insurrectionists had been broken, but was the price worth it? Shepard had asked himself that question his entire life, only to be answered by the pictures of lives he had saved in the long run.

Torfan was a cruel reminder of human weakness. He could not save both the galaxy and his men's lives. He had to choose which was more important, and being forced to play God was something he didn't sign up for. He replayed the events over and over in his head, trying to think of something he could have done to save them, to no avail. No matter what he did, he couldn't stop them from getting gunned down one by one as they planted the charges on the enemy base. To the rest of the galaxy, Torfan was a major victory against Insurrectionist forces. To Shepard, it was the day he lost his closest friends. Maybe it was a victory, but it was a hollow one.

Shepard put the files back down on his desk. He hadn't thought much about Torfan in a while, not since Hackett brought it up. He looked down at the photos of his new team, and felt fear. Fear that they would die as well. These weren't good emotions for a leader to have, he knew there was always the possibility that any one of them could die. Still, he couldn't help but have strong feelings on the matter. He may be a ruthless living war machine, but he is still human.

I won't let them down. I will hold back their death. I won't end this mission like I did Torfan.

With that, Shepard closed the files.

"Shepard, we've reached Pinnacle Station.", said Joker over the comms as they dropped out of slipspace.

"I'm on my way.", said Shepard. He grabbed his M6C/SOCOM and put his helmet on. With that, he was off to the bridge.

Shepard reached the bridge just in time to see Pinnacle Station come into view. Pinnacle Station was shaped like a large rod with a few rings around it, similar to the orbital defense platforms orbiting Earth. For the past several years it has been the training grounds for the SPARTAN IVs, equipped with the latest virtual reality training programs to prepare SPARTANS for the tough stuff. After Reach it was decided that secret military projects would not be started on planets since they were too difficult to defend. Instead, training facilities and listening posts would be built on space stations where they are more defensible. This is where the people Shepard needs reside. It will also provide a good opportunity to observe their skills first hand.

Pinnacle Station seemed to come closer and closer with each second as the Normandy began its approach run. The station was covered in automated MAC Turrets and Pulse Lasers, ready to provide defense the minute it is needed. A few of them were trained on the Normandy as the station waited for them to call in.

"ONI Tower, this is UNSC Normandy requesting permission to dock.", said Joker in a formal manner.

"Roger Normandy. Verifying clearance.", the female voice in the tower responded.

A second later she returned.

"Clearance verified. Please dock at docking bay 58.", the voice said.

The Normandy once again meticulously weaved through the frigates and other war ships surrounding the station, finally landing at the correct docking bay. Two docking clamps came down and secured the ship in place.

Shepard, in his full suit of custom N7 MJOLNIR VII Armor- blackish gray armor with a red stripe down his shoulder and arm plates- yanked EDI out of her terminal and put her chip in his helmet.

"EDI, check to make sure my suit is fully operational.", ordered Shepard. You never know when you're going to be in a fight, and it's

best to be prepared.

While EDI was running the diagnostic, Shepard double checked his M6C/SOCOM pistol to make sure everything was in working order.

"Everything is good Shepard. Shields are at 100% as is active camo. Medigel injectors are fully loaded. Motion sensors are working. The MJOLNIR is operating at peak efficiency.", said EDI as she finished her diagnostic.

Shepard turned to Joker.

"Stay here unless you want to go toe to toe with SPARTANs in some of the most grueling and inhumane exercises in military history.", said Shepard.

Joker nodded in a sarcastic manner. "Aye aye, Commander."

With his suit operating well and everything else in order, Shepard took his Pelican into Pinnacle Station.

* * *

><p>Pinnacle Station_

**Two Days Later**

James Vega pulled his chin up over the bar for the three hundredth time. He was a work out machine, even for a SPARTAN. That explained his big muscles and broad shoulders. What it didn't explain was why he had been chosen to be a SPARTAN. He ran away from the fight while his friends gave their lives.

I don't deserve to be here. I should be dead. Yet I'm not. Whatever. As long as I keep doing what I'm doing, the past will be behind me soon enough.

Fehl Prime seemed to follow Vega wherever he went. The weight of his dead friends seemed to drag him down. He was following orders, yes. It didn't make leaving the past behind any easier. Life felt hollow after that deployment. Even joining the SPARTAN IVs couldn't take the stain his friend's blood left on him away. All that he could do is continue to keep moving, hoping that one day he can outrun the memory of the thousands of civilians he left behind to be slaughtered by Covenant Loyalists.

Vega continued with his strenuous work out, pulling his chin over the bar time after time. James Vega was a big man, his muscles bulging through his skin tight shirt. Like all SPARTANs, he worked out everyday, but he also did a little extra for recreation. He had opted to work out without his armor on. MJOLNIR Armor makes everything too easy. He chose to keep the Standard Helmet. It was a good cross between protection and visibility. The rest of his armor was a modified version of the EOD armor, specifically designed to increase his defense by shedding or absorbing plasma and laser rounds.

He was white and most of his head a buzzcut, except for the small patch up at the top of his head.

He was still relatively new to the SPARTANs, like most people on Pinnacle Station. The more experienced SPARTANs were deployed somewhere, either on a secret mission for ONI or stationed at strategically important worlds in case the unthinkable happened.

I hope my training doesn't last much longer. I need some real action., thought Vega as he dropped from the bar and wiped his face with a nearby towel.

His workout done, he exited the gym and hit the shower.

* * *

><p>On an empty grass land stood a signal beacon, the sole man made structure in the amber-colored field. Ashley Williams hugged a nearby pillar on a balcony surrounding the beacon tightly while a squad of Sangheilli and Unggoy soldiers approached her position. She clutched her plasma assault rifle tight. She knew that they were coming, and she couldn't let them take the signal beacon off line. It could mean doom for the entire colony. With an incredibly swift motion she rolled out of cover and unleashed a punishing volley of green plasma from her Plasma Assault Rifle-21 into the enemy squad, killing at least three Unggoy and severely damaging the Sangheilli's shields. The Sangheilli quickly took notice and began firing back with his own plasma rifle, and scored four direct hits. Ashley slid back into cover to allow her shields to recharge. UNSC Plasma wasn't as potent as Sangheilli plasma weapons, but they didn't over heat as quickly due to the invention of heat absorbers, which could cool the weapon by absorbing the plasma's heat.<p>

Ashley took this to her advantage and ran back out of cover, taking the gamble that the Sangheilli's weapon was recharging. She was right. She emptied what was left of the weapon's charge into the alien and watched it fall to the ground as a corpse. Two of the Unggoy charged towards the camp with grenades, clearly on a suicide run. Ashley pulled out her M6D Pistol and scoped in using her visor and picked them off from a distance.

She holstered it, breathing a sigh of satisfaction. Suddenly three Sangheilli uncloaked on her metal balcony. One took the advantage and forced her onto floor. Ashley took her foot and shoved it as hard as she could it the Sangheilli's chest, breaking a lot of Sangheilli bones in the process. She quickly got on her feet and stepped on the Sangheilli's head, killing the already injured creature. She couldn't dodge the second Sangheilli's shove and fell off the balcony. She steadied herself as she fell, allowing her suit to absorb the impact of the fall. Soon after the Sangheilli soldiers followed her to the ground. She crawled her way towards a shotgun leaning next to a nearby dead body with the Sangheilli in hot pursuit.

The two Sangheilli approached rapidly, energy swords in hand. Ashley finally had the shotgun in hand and let loose two mighty blasts into one of the soldiers. The first shot took down his shields, the second took his life.

The second sangheilli, after witnessing his comrade die, strafed back and to the side. He activated an energy shield to complement his sword. Ashley got on her feet and strafed around the enemy soldier, unloading shell after shell into him only to be blocked as he raised his energy shield up. Finally, a shot broke through the shield and

partially injured the Sangheili soldier. Enraged, he charged at her with his energy sword.

Ashley pulled the trigger on her shotgun, planning to put the Sangheili down for good.

Nothing.

She had expended all her ammo taking his shield down, leaving none for the kill shot. Even with SPARTAN reflexes, she wouldn't be able to reach for her side arm by the time he reached her. With a swift grapple, the Sangheili soldier lifted her up into the air and thrust his energy sword into her gut.

Ashley looked down and saw the blade go through her, and felt the life slowly drain from her body. With her dieing breath, she pulled the pin on a plasma grenade and stuck it to her foe. She lived just long enough to see her killer explode in a blaze of blue energy, and then closed her eyes.

****SIMULATION COMPLETE****

Ashley got back up, breaking out into a cold sweat. The holographic enviroment she was training in transformed into a gray painted room, just one of the many holographic training rooms on the station. The generic colony wasn't under attack by the Sangheili.

It always feels so real.

"You need to do better, SPARTAN. If an alien really does shove a blade into your gut, you won't get any second chances. Now clear out.", said the drill sergeant in charge of the exercise. The exercise was designed to teach SPARTANs how to defend objectives against enemy soldiers. Technically, she succeeded, but it's preferable to survive.

Ashley was tall, white and had brown hair which she usually kept in a bun. Her armor was white colored CQB variant of the MJOLNIR VII armor. She could have picked a different style, but the CQB armor's maneuverability complemented her fast-paced up close and personal combat style. The downside was less protection, but that's where speed came in.

She only recently arrived at Pinnacle, but her scores were already higher than most SPARTANs on the station, including some of the vets. It had only taken a terrorist attack on an Alliance colony for her to get here.

It's sad that people had to die for command to look past their prejudice and pick me.

Her family's history had always haunted her. The prejudice had tied her down for a long time. Eden Prime was where she made her name, and she was going to prove that she deserved it.

After completeing the exercise, Ashley left for the mess hall.

* * *

><p>Kaidan Alenko carefully lifted each block, four at a time using

his "biotics", which was the official name for his element zero-based powers. He was building a tower, something that required precision and focus. Other biotically augmented SPARTANs might have focused on how powerful their throws are or how big a shockwave they could make, but Kaidan knew better. He knew that control was more important than power, because power without control was not serving you, you serve it.<p>

Similar to ONI and the military. Kaidan wanted to be a SPARTAN, and the only way they would let him in is if he became a lab rat for their new experiment. He agreed, of course. BAaT was rough, even rougher than other SPARTAN courses. It was almost like being a SPARTAN II. They filled him with cybernetics like the L2 Implant to boost the power of the element zero modules implanted in him. After that, they manufactured a specialized MJOLNIR variant to boost their subject's powers. His was blue and looked exactly like the standardized MJOLNIR VII armor.

However, was it worth it? The experimental technology was painful. The L2 implant caused horrible headaches. However, it made him powerful. Powerful enough to serve the Alliance. That was enough.

Kaidan was white, had black hair, and a little asian ancestry in him.

Brick by brick he continued to build his tower until it reached the desired height. Then, he used his biotics and tore it to pieces in the same way he built it.

Well, that's enough for now. Time to eat., thought Kaidan.

* * *

><p>The station's mess hall was at the heart of the ship, and possibly the busiest place as well. It was always open to accommodate the training's odd hours, so the chefs had to have something cooked up all the time. When soldiers are deployed, they usually have to eat MREs, which don't taste great. So whenever possible the military likes to treat them to a good meal. Soldiers have to have something to look forward to.<p>

Although there is no real standard meal time, there is usually a time when most SPARTANs are through training for the day and are looking for some good food and some R and R.

This is what drew Kaidan here. Biotics had to eat a little more since they require more energy, so this was time to eat. He picked up a tray and stepped in line in front of a bigger guy, no doubt one of the Heavy-class SPARTANs. A woman with her hair in a bun was in front of him. The line was set up buffet style, and the chefs were serving up a good old fashioned Italian meal. Kaidan grabbed a bowl of Caesar Salad, a hefty plate of spaghetti, and a slice of garlic bread and went into the mess hall. Other SPARTANs were sitting at their table, either comparing their scores in the simulators or playing cards. He opted to take a seat at an empty table.

It was almost like high school again, except now everyone is a supersoldier who can knock a guy's head off with a slap. He began his meal, starting with the delicious spaghetti.

Soon after he was joined by the big man he had been ahead of in line. The large, muscular man took a seat next to him with a plate as full as Kaidan's.

"Hey, I haven't seen you around here. You new?", asked the man sincerely. He was a hulk of a guy, even when compared to other SPARTANs in the room. He was wearing standard issue green military pants with a skin tight white t-shirt that showed off his impressive physique.

"You could say that. I'm front the BAaT program. I've been here for a few weeks, but I haven't had any group training", said Kaidan as he took another forkfull of spaghetti into his mouth. He was nearly finished with the spaghetti.

"Oh yeah, ONI's new super-secret SPARTAN program. Did they kidnap you as a child?", joked Vega. It was a common joke among the SPARTANs, despite SPARTAN IVs being volunteers. The civies still got that one messed up sometimes.

"Nah, it was nothing like that.", responded Kaidan after a brief chuckle. He chose to not mention the more brutal parts of the program.

They did kidnap a few others..., Kaidan didn't say.

"So what did they do to you guys over there? Did they let a radioactive spider bite you or something?", said Vega, further pressing for details. ONI was famous enough that everyone wanted to know what they were up to but ONI was so good at hiding it no one could really tell.

Kaidan laughed a little at that one. He liked this guy. Tough, but doesn't take himself too seriously. It was a nice thing to have when dealing with some of the stuff they put you through here. Everyone needs friends, even walking weapons.

"Normally I'd say it's classified, but ONI said it was okay to talk about it. Probably some kind of propaganda thing. Here it goes.", said Kaidan.

Kaidan looked at his utensils and lifted a dark energy enveloped hand. Blue energy appeared around a fork as he lifted it telekinetically.

"That's some cool stuff man. Can you do that in combat?" asked Vega, who thought it was cool but had enough composure to make sure he sounded professional about it.

"Oh yeah. And much more.", was Kaidan's response. Dark energy was becoming a new weapon on the battlefield. The problem is that it's difficult to produce. It has to be formed in a reactor, and it costs quite a bit to run them. The entire element zero stockpile had gone into the BAaT Program as a means to further enhance the already powerful supersoldiers.

"That's loco.", said Vega. He had a hispanic heritage, but you wouldn't know it at first glance.

"So what are you? A Heavy? You're a pretty big guy.", asked Kaidan. It was obvious, but he was eager to change the topic away from his element zero augmentations.

Vega smiled a little at that one. He liked being the big guy in the room. It was a good way of being noticed.

"Yeah, I'm a Heavy-Class SPARTAN. I get to carry the big gun.", Vega said with a smug smirk. All Heavy-class SPARTANs carried the heavy weapons into battle, ranging everything from SPARTAN Lasers to chain guns.

Kaidan finished his spaghetti and tackled the Casar salad.

Just as he said that the woman with her hair in a bun sat down next to them with a slice of pizza and a piece of garlic bread.

Vega, being the social one, initiated contact with the women.

"Hey, so who are you? I think I've seen you around before. Target practice I think?", said Vega.

"Yeah, I think I've seen you too. What are you guys up to?", she said.

"Just talking about our classifications. What are you? You don't look specialized. You vanilla?", asked Kaidan.

"I'm CQB. I do have the enhanced reflexes mod for my armor, but that hardly counts as specialized. Now to why I found you. Have you heard the rumors?", said Ashley in a hushed tone.

Kaidan and Vega gave each other a look of confusion and shook their heads.

"No, what's going on?", asked Kaidan. Rumors usually didn't lead to anything good.

"Rumor has it that there is an ONI spook here. Some are saying he's looking at our files.", she said, a little nervously.

"You bring anyone with you?", Vega asked Kaidan half jokingly. After all, Kaidan was the one with the mysterious past.

"Don't look at me. I left ONI behind.", said Kaidan.

Or so I thought.

Just then a drill instructor walked up to their table. They always seemed to show up out of nowhere. It made it impossible to get away with breaking the rules.

"Surprise surprise, everyone. You've just been given a surprise virtual reality exercise. Get suited up, you're all coming.", he said in his drill sergeant voice.

The group looked at each other and got up, off to suit up for whatever mysterious exercise they were being sent to; leaving their food behind.

* * *

><p>Five minutes later they all showed up armor-clad. Vega was wearing his bulky, heavy armor and wielding a plasma machine gun with a heat absorber on his back. All plasma weapons had to have one or else they would over heat quickly like Sangheili plasma rifles. Normally the device would be built into the gun, but with heavy weapons it required a larger absorber for sustained fire. Ashley and Kaidan were in full armor as well, but theirs was lighter and more maneuverable than Vega's since they were wearing the standard MJOLNIR VII armor, with only a few variants such as CQB and Biotic. Kaidan's armor was blue and had been specialized to augment his biotics while Ashley's was white.<p>

Vega and Kaidan looked vaguely like a cyclops in the standard helmet, since it only has a horizontal slit for vision instead of a visor. This design reduced weakpoints in the armor at the cost of visibility. Ashley's CQB visor gave a little more vision but was more vulnerable to enemy fire than the standard helmet.

They all stepped forward in unison into the virtual training facility and looked up to the control booth. Their drill sergeant was there at the controls, and a mysterious SPARTAN IV in gray-black color scheme with red stripes going down the shoulders stood next to him. He had his hands behind his back and his helmet on, but they could feel his eyes on them.

"You think that's him?", Ashley said on her helmet to helmet comms.

"I don't know.", replied Kaidan.

They were all a little nervous, even though they were SPARTANs. However, because they were SPARTANs they swallowed their fear and readied themselves.

The speakers in the room suddenly came on with a loud screech, more likely designed to get their attention than a technical problem.

"SPARTANs, this exercise has been designed to test your ability to survive in an unknown combat situation against powerful enemy forces. Your mission is to defeat all enemy forces without dieing. This will require a good use of tactics and teamwork.", the drill sergeant said with an unusually calm voice, as if he was reading the words off of something.

"Begin."

The gray room turned into holographic arena, circular in shape and with walls on every side. There were no doors or windows, just stone circular walls surrounding the large, empty arena. No way out other than to complete the mission. Two massive Mgalekgolo, otherwise known as Hunters, materialized into the room. They were even bigger than their real life counter part. Both of them charged up their plasma cannons and started firing.

Kaidan and Vega dodged just and time, while Ashley sidestepped the blast and charged one of the behemoths. She fired her fully powered plasma assault rifle only for her shots to be absorbed by the

Hunter's thick armor.

The Hunter then batted her back into the wall with his mighty shield. Despite being composed of hundreds of smaller eel like creatures, the Hunters were very strong. It was like they were one giant muscle.

"Well, that didn't work.", Ashley said as she rose to her feet, dust and rocks falling off of her armor.

Vega began firing his plasma machine gun, hoping to suppress the massive creatures. It forced them back, but it wasn't going to take long for them to raised their armor again and charge up their weapons. They seemed invincible.

"Okay, what have we got to work with?", asked Ashley, hoping to find some resource that could kill the alien creatures.

"We all have plasma grenades, Ashley and I have plasma rifles, Vega has his armor lock and machine gun, and I have my biotics", said Kaidan with a full list of available weapons and gear.

"We all know Hunters are exposed at their backs, so if we could somehow get behind them we could gun em' down.", said Vega. The M'galekgolo chose to stay with the Sangheili after the Great Schism, so tactics on how to defeat them were in every UNSC textbook.

"I have an idea.", Ashley said as she swiftly dodged a plasma blast using her enhanced reflexes armor upgrade.

"Vega, keep the other Hunter busy. Kaidan, do you think you can hold the other Hunter still with your biotics?", she asked, a gutsy plan forming in her mind.

"I can, but not for long. Whatever you're gonna do, do it fast.", Kaidan said. His biotic abilities were strong, but holding a creature the size of these down wasn't exactly easy.

"Hey, loco, you want some of this?", said Vega as he unloaded another volley of hot, green plasma into the second Hunter, buying a little time for his teammates to enact Ashley's plan.

The plasma managed to force the Hunter back, and Kaidan took this as his cue.

Kaidan slung his rifle over his back and put his hands forward, the palms glowing with dark energy. He used as much of his biotic power as he could to freeze the first Hunter in a force field.

Ashley then ran as quickly as she could and slid underneath the monster's legs. Just as the Hunter broke through the force field she jammed her rifle into it's back and pulled the trigger at point blank range, doing tremendous damage to the creature as the plasma burned through the eel-like creatures that made up the Hunter. She then climbed up the creature's back and tagged a plasma grenade onto it's exposed neck, jumping off just as it detonated in a brilliant neon blue blaze and felled the mighty foe.

Vega shouted in excitement.

"Yeah! That's what I'm talking about!", he said.

The other Hunter realised what had just happened to his counterpart and backed into a corner, ensuring that it's backside was covered. These were smart, they knew their weakness and were ready for the SPARTANS.

"Now what?", said Kaidan with a little frustration in his voice. He already felt drained of energy, but that wasn't going to stop him from finishing the fight.

The Hunter charged another blast from his cannon, the plasma powerful enough to set part of the arena ablaze and caused some of the structure to crumble. Ashley had to shove the others out of the way since their reflexes weren't fast enough to react to the incoming blast, saving all their lives.

Vega paused for a moment.

"Hey Kaidan, can you throw me with those biotics?", asked Vega as he unleashed another burst from his chain gun to stun the beast.

"Yeah, why?", answered Kaidan.

"Okay, I'm gonna armor lock and you stick all your plasma grenades on me. Then, Kaidan will toss me into that Hunter and we'll kill it. Even a Hunter can't withstand the force of that many plasma nades'." , said Vega.

"If your shields don't hold that's going to be a one way trip." , said Ashley, remembering her recent training session.

"They'll hold." , Vega said with a smile no one could see behind his helmet. Still, they could feel it, and that was good enough.

"Alright, let's do it." , said Ashley while ejecting a spent energy pack and loading a new one into her rifle.

Vega crouched and locked his armor, creating a rigid high-invulnerable shield around his body. Ashley placed her remaining two plasma grenades and Kaidan placed all of his. Then, with a mighty push, Kaidan shot Vega like a cannon right into the Hunter.

The grenades detonated into a huge blue fireball as Vega slammed into the Hunter. The Hunter fell to the ground with a great crash, just like his brother. Even his thick armor could not protect him from such a powerful blast.

Ashley and Kaidan waited to see if their comrade had made it out of his human cannon ball plan.

After a minute, Vega gave a mighty heave and pushed the Hunter's corpse off of him, no small feat judging by the size of the creature.

"Told you the shields would hold." , he said.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

The virtual training room once again returned to it's original form, the gray, lifeless, empty room it had been when they first came here.

They looked up just in time to see the mysterious SPARTAN leave the control booth.

"Exercise is over, people. You've been ordered to the hangar bay. Get there ASAP.", the drill sergeant said.

"The hangar bay? Why would they need us in there?", said Kaidan with confusion.

"This must have something to do with that ONI spook.", said Ashley, voicing her theory.

Vega had already started towards the hangar.

Every step the SPARTANs took seemed heavy. It wasn't so much fear as anxiety. ONI doesn't sit in on a training exercise for no reason. Something was up, and they're right in the middle of it. Vega arrived first due to his head start, even though Ashley could have beaten him if she accessed the improved reflexes feature of her MJOLNIR Armor. Every Spartan had faster reflexes than a normal human, but she was especially designed to be fast.

Ashley arrived second, and Kaidan third though not far behind. They all moved at a swift yet respectable jog. One wants to look professional when dealing with ONI.

The hangar bay was totally empty aside from one pelican and the ominous ONI SPARTAN awaiting them. He had his hands behind his back and his helmet was off, gently placed on the floor. He was pale with a black buzzcut. His armor was some kind of Recon variant, clearly designed with stealth in mind. It had the same gray-black-red color scheme they had seen last time.

The three SPARTANs stood side by side at attention, saluting the mysterious figure. His face remained firm, studying each off the three SPARTANs.

"At ease, SPARTANs. You can remove your helmets.", the operative said.

The SPARTANs dropped the salute and did as he said.

"I am Commander Shepard. I've been looking over your records. So far they've been good. Very good. In fact, good enough to gain ONI's attention.", he said with an air of mystery. ONI spooks liked to keep people on edge, adds to their ominous feel. This was something Shepard had leveraged quite a bit during his career.

All of their faces were solid as stone, but inside they were confused, trying to determine whether gaining ONI's attention is a good thing. After all, most of their projects had some kind of terrible secret behind it. If ONI was anything else it's leaders would probably be arrested.

"You have all shown exceptional skill and dedication to the human cause. When I sat in on your exercise I could tell you three were

born for more than some garrison deployment on a strategic world. You want to be part of the action.", he said, pausing for just a moment to gauge their reaction.

The SPARTAN's facial expressions remained firm, their eyes trained on the Commander.

"I have a mission for you. It's dangerous, and it's never been done before. It is vital to the human race. It very well could be a suicide mission. I won't order you to join me. This is an all volunteer mission. There is no shame in bowing out. So, you must choose here. Will you join me?", said the Commander. He knew what their reaction would be before he asked the question.

All three SPARTANs stepped forward. A SPARTAN never turns down a mission, especially when it's dangerous and suicidal. For Ashley, it's a chance to prove herself. For Kaidan, it's a worthy cause. For Vega, it's a chance to leave his past behind. All of these were valid motives, despite not knowing what they were walking into or the role they were playing in a larger plan. They are SPARTANs. SPARTANs always rise up to a challenge. Now they have one.

"I'm glad you answered the call. Now, get on the Pelican. It will take you to my ship. From there, we can get the ball rolling. Now move out SPARTANs.", said Shepard. The SPARTANs grabbed their helmets and marched off to the Pelican dropship at the back of the hangar.

All the pieces are set. Now, the games can begin.

Now, we're ready.

* * *

><p>Well, now the team is ready. I used the classic super-team model for building the team dynamic. It's often used in superhero stories, but it fit well here. We've got one tank, one telekinetic, one fast reflexes, and one stealth. Looks like they're set to enter the Relay...

Thanks to everyone who is sticking with me, your support has been greatly appreciated. Keep the reviews coming. Your feedback makes all the difference.

Speaking of which, did you guys like my action scenes? I wasn't really sure if people would. Please leave your answer in a review.

5. The Arrival

Thanks for sticking with me! Disclaimer: I own neither Mass Effect or Halo.

* * *

><p>UNSC Eternal Sunset_

**Orbiting near the Forerunner Artifact**

Admiral Hackett stared out the widow of the observation deck aboard the Frigate UNSC _Eternal Sunset_. A day ago Shepard had informed him that his team was ready, and so Hackett and Anderson conjured up a few of the best frigates in the UNSC to escort the Normandy to the artifact. He would have liked to send more, but the agreement was that the UNSC would not send anything bigger than a frigate into the area and no more than five in any given 48 hour period. He had to honor this agreement, even though the System's Alliance felt uneasy about it.

In addition to protecting the Normandy, his battlegroup had to protect the small fleet of civilian ships who arrived to watch Shepard be the first man to enter a new galaxy. The civilian ships went from luxury yachts who had the money and time to watch the historic event to news crews here to capture the scene. Hackett had gone to great lengths to ensure the press was aware of what was about to happen. He even managed to convince ONI to fire up it's propaganda machine. News stations were talking about it everywhere, and so were the civilians.

The Sangheili did not want to miss the action either. The Sangheili's two largest fleets surrounded the planet and the relay, no doubt led by Fleet Master Haer'Vhokuree and Fleet Master Alei'Lunjasse.

They were probably there to make sure the UNSC didn't pull any kind of invasion. They were well prepared for such an attack. While humans had a better understanding of Forerunner technology, they did not have Forerunner artifacts in the same abundance as the Sangheili.

It is this division that makes the Sangheili a big enough threat to start a cold war with. Humans had the most powerful shields and the most advanced slipspace drives, but the Sangheili without a doubt had better impulse drives and their energy weapons took less time to charge and did more damage, despite overheating more quickly than UNSC weapons.

In a defensive setting, the Sangheili had the advantage. This was the setting the ships were in. One word from either Fleetmaster and Hackett's small group of Frigates would be toast. All Hackett had to go on was their word. The Sangheili usually honored it. Still, there always is the chance. The chance everyone fears. The chance it might go wrong.

Anderson then walked into the observation lounge, easing Hackett's nerves a bit. Anderson had always been a close ally of Hackett. He stood up for Hackett's plans when he needed him to do so. However, today the new Admiral seemed tired.

He was wearing a weary face, the face of a man who had a large workload and not enough time to do it.

"I talked to the other ships. All shields are raised to maximum. Should something go wrong, we'll stay here and provide cover for the fleeing civilian ships.", said Anderson in a tired tone. Being an admiral is more work than most realize.

"Good. I put the rest of the navy on high alert. They can be here in a couple hours if something goes wrong.", said Hackett with a blank expression on his war-worn face. He didn't want to see a repeat of the Human-Covenant War, but his job was to think the unthinkable, and

that takes it's toll on even the most hardened of men. He had seen enough of that during his tour of duty during the war.

Hackett put his hands behind his back and stepped a little closer to the glass, the only thing seperating him from the vacuum of space. It was his favorite pass time. Just staring into the depths of space.

"You know, somehow I feel Shepard was destined for this. I was wrong to doubt him. He has my faith, and he has plenty of others as well. He'll win this for us.", Hackett said. It wasn't so much supporting Shepard as reassuring himself that he had chosen the right man for the job.

Could Shepard handle it?

"I've known Shepard since before he became a SPARTAN. I know he won't let us down.", said Anderson while boosting Hackett's confidence. It was true. Anderson had mentored Shepard since early in his military career. Couldn't stop him from being a spook, but he mentored him nonetheless.

Let's hope we're not wrong., thought Hackett, staring out into the stars.

**S.S. Honor Unto The Ancestors**

Haer Vhokuree sat in his tactical room, surveying the situation. The humans had followed the stipulations of the agreement and had only sent five Frigates. However, they were followed by hundreds of smaller ships. They didn't have very strong shields and they had no weaponry. Clearly civilian ships. His capital ship could easily annihilate them. One order and he could have thousands of Banshees swarm their ships from all sides.

Nonetheless, it made him uncomfortable seeing so many ships. The Humans were masters of trickery. It was a common joke that they are distant relatives of the Kig-Yar, that vile race of pirates. He had seen their skill in this many times. He knew that the Humans were experts at intelligence and subterfuge. He witnessed that during the Sangheili civil war between Thel and dissenting Sangheili. It kept them down long enough for the humans to upgrade their fleets and technology, making a once easily conquered foe into a major threat.

Not to mention they were good at counter intelligence. Humans had some means of making their fleets seem much larger than they actually are. It took a while to figure out, but the Sangheili finally discovered that humans were using hard light holographic projections to make their fleets look impossibly huge. That was a small victory, but the downside is that you can't get reliable intel from it. For all the Sangheili knew, the human fleet really is that big.

It all stems from the different ways the races fought.

The Sangheili were masters of battlefield warfare. War was a sacred art among them. It honored the Ancestors to fight in the name of your was no greater honor than to die gloriously in had centuries of experience in both space and ground warfare, and they invented most tricks in the book. They were a force to be reckoned with, even in

their currently weakened state.

Humans, on the other hand, were masters of trickery. They were sly, manipulative, and masters of intelligence. Humans had managed to trick loyal Sangheili into giving up classified information just by figuring out which buttons to press. They won wars off the battlefield, not on it. They won through turning others against each other, assassinations, and illusions. They could be great warriors, fierce in combat if they wanted to be. However, winning is more important than honor among humans, so they usually reserve full scale battles for really bad situations.

In the eyes of the Sangheili, humans could not be trusted. Despite being the fiercest race on the battlefield they had fought since the M'galekgolo, they could not be trusted. It was too dangerous to trust a creature with many faces.

Which brought Haer' and his colleague Alei' here. It was their job to ensure this was not a human trick of some sort. Haer' was convinced it was, but he would look like a fool if he attacked and Alei' did not. His pleas to the Council had gone unheard. He could assassinate them and take their place, but he would not be a very popular leader. His only options were to wait, and he was not the patient one.

Haer' watched the screens in the room, taking a look at the artifact. He knew that humans are planning something, he just can't figure out what.

Suddenly, the doors to his tactical room opened.

"What is it?", Haer grunted without bothering to face his subordinate.

"Fleetmaster, all Banshees and Seraphs are prepared. The minute they are needed, they will be ready.", said the Sangheili officer.

"Very well. Return to your post.", said Haer'Vhokuree with suppressed frustration in his voice.

He looked at the vid screed one more time.

What are you up to, humans?

* * *

><p>UNSC Normandy_

**Forerunner Artifact**

Shepard and the other SPARTANs woke up from cryo sleep a little earlier than usual. They wanted to be awake and ready when they reached the artifact. After all, they were making history. No sleeping on the job. None of them were in armor, but they certainly were ready to gear up if needed.

Shepard exited and went straight to the bridge.

"Commander, we're dropping out of slipspace...now.", said Joker just as they exited slipspace.

Shepard then stepped out of the Bridge for a moment while the crew came in.

The three SPARTANs stared out the window of the Normandy. The sight that greeted the crew of the Normandy was bizzare. Five frigates were staring down at least twenty or so Sangheili ships, in all their purple glory. Two of them had to be capital ships from their size. In addition to the military ships, there were hundreds of smaller civilian ships, some of them news crews.

"If I had known we were going to be on TV I would have dressed more sharply.", said Vega. He smiled. Finally, he was getting a piece of the action.

"Oh please. We're not going to be on TV, the ship is.", replied Ashley, half disappointed that they weren't getting on TV.

Shepard reentered the bridge, wearing his "I'm in charge" face. He always has that face when he's about to give orders.

"Joker, pull us behind that Frigate. Everyone else, get back into the CIC.", ordered Shepard.

"Aye, Commander.", Joker said as he obeyed orders.

The others did as they were ordered as well. The CIC was a new addition to UNSC ships. It had a holographic table in the center which could pull up a map of the galaxy or a picture of the ship, or just about any other picture. It made being in command easier.

"EDI, extend the airlock.", ordered Shepard.

"Sir, there is nothing there.", said EDI in confusion.

"Just do as I say.", said Shepard in a tired voice.

An ONI Prowler uncloaked right beside them, connecting their airlock to the Normandy's. Accross the airlock walked a tall white woman with brown hair and a sinister looking smile. She was wearing a black ONI uniform that was very form fitting.

Vega had to use all his stength to suppress a whistle at her as she walked by.

"SPARTANs, attention!", said Shepard.

The SPARTANs quickly assembled into a line, saluting Shepard.

"This is ONI Operative Miranda Lawson. She will be joining us on our mission through the Artifact.", said Shepard somewhat unenthusiastically.

"It's a pleasure to work with the great Commander Shepard and his SPARTANs. I can already tell this was a good investment for the Illusive Man.", she said in an australian accent.

She looked more civilian than military, complete with long hair. She was wearing a face that made her seem smug. Clearly, she was an ice queen.

"Now, you can return to duty.", Shepard said.

He watched her walk away into her quarters.

_I need something on her. Her loyalty to the Illusive Man is too great.,_thought Shepard. He then entered the bridge with his other SPARTANs.

The other SPARTANs were chatting about who killed the most Sangheili in the simulator on Pinnacle Station when Shepard walked in. His presence always chilled the room, as if things just got serious. With him, they usually did.

The words the whole crew had been waiting for Shepard to say over the past few days were finally being said.

_"Joker, take us through the artifact.", Shepard ordered.

Joker started moving forward, and the whole world seemed to stand still. The Sangheili were on high alert, as was the UNSC. Anything could happen in the next minute.

EDI appeared.

"Shepard, it's asking for the ship's mass.", said EDI.

"Give it.", ordered Shepard.

The Normandy drew closer and closer to the artifact. Joker decided to seize the moment.

"Space, the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Normandy. It's continueing mission: To do whatever Commander Shepard says, to boldy go through strange glowing objects!"

Just as Joker's speech ended the Forerunner artifact struck the ship with a bolt of blue energy, causing the ship to reach speeds never before reached.

Miranda ran to the bridge to see where they were. The whole crew was in awe.

"EDI, where are we?", asked Shepard, the others too amazed to talk.

"I do not know, Shepard. My database does not match any of the surrounding stars. I believe we really are in a new galaxy.", said EDI. Even she was in awe.

Shepard took a look around to make sure nothing was broken, just to make sure EDI was right. She was. They had reached a new galaxy.

"EDI, how long did it take to get here?", asked Shepard, still a little amazed.

"Less than a second.", EDI said.

That took everyone's breath away. Less than a second to travel to to another galaxy.

"Less than a second? To reach another galaxy?", asked Kaidan, speaking for everyone in the room.

"If we could travel to another galaxy in less than a second, imagine what it would be like between star systems.", said Ashley. She was holding onto the railing, looking out into space as if it were the first time she had been on a starship.

"Imagine, with a few of these we could instantly go to any system we wanted to, no matter how far away it is.", said EDI.

Shepard stared at the window, taking it all in. He then remembered that he is supposed to call in once he's on the other side. That's important.

* * *

><p>UNSC Eternal Sunset_

**Orbiting Forerunner Artifact**

Every window and video screen on the ship was crowded with people trying to get a glimpse of history. Hundreds of cameras were trained on the Normandy when it was struck by a bolt of energy. People from all over the galaxy were watching, waiting to see if it had worked.

Including Hackett.

He had reserved the observation lounge for himself and other admirals, though the only admirals on the ship were Hackett and Anderson.

"I hope that was supposed to happen.", said Hackett in a concerned tone. His plan banked on Shepard making it through successfully.

"If it did, Shepard will call in.", said Anderson, who was also concerned about his protege'.

Three more minutes passed, the whole galaxy sat on edge. Everyone waited, hoping for an answer.

Then, when most were about to give up hope, the radio on the Eternal Sunset picked something up and relayed it to the media.

"This is Commander Shepard of the UNSC Normandy, vessel of the Systems Alliance. We have successfully traveled to another galaxy. I repeat, we have successfully traveled to another galaxy. Mission Accomplished.", said Shepard over the long distance communication array that used the artifact to transmit.

Every human in the galaxy soared. Crowds cheered everywhere. Fireworks went off all over Earth. Drinkers toasted in celebration.

Of all the wild cheers, no one felt more satisfied than Admiral Hackett. Only he knew what Shepard really meant when he said "Mission Accomplished". It was a message.

Hackett knew what had just happened more than any other. Humanity had united. Everyone was a little less Outer Colony or Inner Colony, and more Human. They were the race that had beaten the Sangheili into intergalactic space. Sure, the Sangheili helped, but by the time ONI's propaganda machine turned on people will still believe humans had won a race.

The whole galaxy now had a common enemy, and Hackett knew that when humanity united it was a very, very, dangerous thing. Now, they were ready to take on the Sangheili if it truly came to that. Even with humanity's advancements, we had a less than great chance at beating the Sangheili if the cold war turned hot. Now, humanity has a real chance. A better chance than we had during the Human-Covenant War, at least.

Shepard delivered a great gift. Time to see what else he brings.

**UNSC Normandy**

**Unknown Galaxy**

"Mission Accomplished.", said Shepard over the mic.

There. Hackett had what he wanted. Time for the rest of the mission: Exploring this galaxy. If there is another artifact here, there may be other Forerunner devices here as well. That would certainly be worth a look. Anything that can give humanity an advantage over other races was on the Alliance's radar. Ever since the war, the Alliance adopted the "Walk softly and carry a big stick" policy. No one wants to mess with the biggest guy on the block. Forerunner tech would certainly help with that.

"Alright, we need to determine where we are in this galaxy. EDI, can you pull anymore information off that thing?", asked Shepard, referring to the artifact.

The others, now regaining composure, awaited her response.

"I'm looking through it. It's a strange device. Someone went to great lengths to ensure it cannot be reverse engineered. Give me another minute.", said EDI.

"Alright, Joker. Keep us in orbit around this thing. Everyone else, get to the meeting room.", said Shepard. His normally stern face had relaxed a bit, but everyone was still a little ancy.

Miranda walked in her normal stride, a dead give away she was a spy. Spies were trained to blend in. Miranda walked as if she were in a crowd, trying to blend in. She walked not too quickly, but not too slowly. It's a habit spies pick up.

Kaidan, Ashley, and Vega on the other hand power walked. The military teaches you to move quickly. It can be intimidating to see hundreds of soldiers march in unison.

Regardless, everyone took a seat around the wooden with a glass center table.

"Alright Miranda, you're supposed to be the expert here. Tell us what

you know about these artifacts.", said Shepard.

Miranda nodded and pulled a device out of her pocket, pressing a few buttons. A holographic picture of the artifacts showed up on the table.

"We really don't know much about them other than that they use element zero to transport things long distance. The best we can tell is that the glowing sphere in the center is a massive core of element zero. We still aren't sure where the element zero came from, we had to synthesize our entire stock in a reactor. If it is naturally occurring, then I don't know where.", Miranda said.

"The real mystery is what rest of the structure is made of. The metal alloy used in it's construction is incredibly tough. We've estimated that only our most powerful weapons could break it, and out of those only a NOVA bomb could do it anywhere quickly.", she continued.

"Another strange thing is the way it seems to work. From our studies with Element Zero, we know that it increases or decreases the mass of an object depending on what kind of charge is used. A positive current increases mass, a negative decreases it.

We also know that the more energy you pump into it, the more potent the effect. To slingshot a ship into another galaxy in less than a second would take a colossal amount of energy, so much that if released it would almost be like firing a Halo.

We just can't figure out how the Forerunners put it together. As I mentioned before, there is no way to turn it off and if it were to be torn apart while active the results would be disastrous. That's pretty much all we know.", said Miranda. She sat back down.

"Okay. Let's not destroy these things then. Alright everyone, we still have a few ground rules beyond what I told you before. First, if you find something call it in first. We're a long way from home and if we get in trouble there is no back up for us, not for a while anyway.

Second, if we find a Forerunner artifact do not touch it. For all we know it could be the detonator to a Halo ring. Let EDI scan it first.

Thirdly, if we make contact with an alien race, avoid contact if possible. If we must communicate, I'll do the talking. Dismissed.", said Shepard.

The team got up from their chairs and left the meeting room. Shepard stared at each of them, remembering the past. Then he got up and exited the meeting room.

* * *

><p>"When do you think EDI will come back with the results?", asked Ashley.<p>

She was just voicing what everyone else was thinking. They were sitting in the hangar. It wasn't as dimly lit as the rest of the ship, with several bright industrial lights to light up the room. The

floors were solid instead of grated, but everything was a gray color.

Vega had managed to set up a pullup bar down there, so they all followed him while they waited. None of them were wearing armor. Kaidan and Ashley were wearing the standard navy blue uniforms while Vega sported his usual navy blue pants and skin tight white shirt. He was the only one wearing dog tags.

They were all a little bored, made worse by the fact they were in another galaxy. It felt wrong to just sit here while they float around a new galaxy. They could pass the time in cryo, but they needed to be ready incase something happened.

"I don't know. They'll get here when they get here. We'll just have to wait.", Kaidan said like an irritated father taking his kids on vacation.

Vega was doing his usual obsseive pullup workout next to them. He dropped down onto the deck. He landed and wiped his face with a nearby towel.

Eager to get to another conversation going and break the silence, Vega spoke up.

"What do you think about the Commander and Miranda? They're both spooks. Think they're connected?", Vega said as he took a seat on a nearby crate.

"I don't think so. Did you see the way he looked at her? It was like he didn't trust her.", said Kaidan. He was seated on a metal chair and hunched forward.

"I don't blame him. She smiles like a serial killer.", said Ashley, who was standing with her arms folded.

"What about the Commander? He's a spook, too.", said Vega.

"What about him? Don't you trust him?", asked Kaidan with a mildly perplexed face. He hadn't known the Commander long, so he wasn't sure he did either. Shepard was still his commanding officer, so he would still respect his wishes. Otherwise it would be insubordination.

"It's not that I don't trust him, I just find him a little creepy.", said Vega leaning back. He was so heavy that it seemed like the create couldn't hold the weight of his muscles.

"How so?", asked Kaidan again.

"He's mysterious. He never actually talks other than to give orders or some epic speech. Even the drill sergeants at Pinnacle Station talked more than he does. It's just a little strange. It's like he's a machine, built and designed for impossible missions.", said Vega, half believing the machine part.

"With all the cybernetics they augment us with, you could say we're all machines.", said Shepard as he appeared out of nowhere.

The team was a little embarressed. They were surprised at the

Commander's sudden appearance and braced for a reprimand.

"Relax, I'm not here to chew you out.", said Shepard, alleviating the team's fears.

"Um, sir, is it okay to ask how long you've been down here?", asked Kaidan.

"A few minutes. Watching my crew interact is amusing. You should check out EDI and Joker sometime.", said Shepard, smiling.

"I thought you didn't interact with mere mortals.", said Vega.

"Even commanding officers get bored, Vega. Being down here is better than sitting at my desk waiting for EDI to finish analyzing the artifacts. I figured checking in on Miranda wasn't going to have good consequences. Us spooks usually don't get along too well.", said Shepard.

That brought back a few unpleasant memories from earlier in his career.

Kai Leng..., thought Shepard.

Vega leaned forward again, attentive to the Commander.

Maybe he's not the machine I thought he was., Vega thought.

Shepard could tell he was getting through to Vega.

Vega got up from his crate and walked over to Shepard with a smug smile on his face.

"I bet you couldn't beat me in a fist fight.", said Vega.

Ashley and Kaidan had a _"He went there."_ look on their face. Vega was huge, so he certainly had the muscle to pull it off.

Shepard smiled right back and stepped forward. All SPARTANs enjoyed a good competition, and Shepard wasn't about to turn one down.

"You're on. I'll tell you what. I'm going to beat you in three hits.", said Shepard.

Yeah right., thought Vega.

Shepard and Vega stepped into a less crowded area in the hangar and Ashley and Kaidan followed to watch the epic fight between their CO and Vega.

Shepard and Vega raised their fists, ready to strike or parry in blow thrown at them.

Vega swiped at Shepard from the side, barely missing Shepard. He then sent an uppercut, hoping to knock Shepard out. Shepard saw it coming and backed away just in time. This heavy move had thrown off Vega's momentum and left him open to attack.

Shepard knew the schematics for the cybernetics of a Heavy SPARTAN.

Going for the ribs wasn't going to do anything, and neither was going for the head. That left one target.

Shepard kneed Vega in the stomach and punch him in the solar plexus once, and then pressed his advantage and knocked the Heavy SPARTAN's legs out from under his unstable body. Vega fell to the floor with a mighty thud.

Shepard leaned down and looked at him.

"Maybe you should stick to machine guns and leave the hand-to-hand stuff to Ashley.", said Shepard, extending his hand down to help him up.

Ashley and Kaidan sat there enjoying the fight, clearly planning to rub it in later.

The bragging would have to wait as EDI's spherical avatar entered the room.

"I'm done examining, and I think I've made a discovery.", EDI said.

"Alright, you heard the lady. Get to the meeting room. I'll grab Miranda.", said Shepard.

Everyone marched up the stairs and into the hallway, Vega trying his best to hide his pain.

* * *

><p>A few seconds later everyone was in the conference room, waiting to hear EDI's discovery. They didn't have to wait long as EDI appeared nearly instantly in the room.<p>

"What do you have for us, EDI?", said Shepard.

EDI appeared in the center of the table.

"I managed to look through some of the specs of the artifact and discovered that their creators labeled them mass relays. So I wondered, "Relay to where?". I started looking, and I discovered that there is more than one mass relay in this galaxy. In fact, there are hundreds. This entire galaxy is networked with Mass Relays. Not all are active, and none of them are as big as the ones we just used.", said EDI.

Everyone in the room thought the same thing. If there are enough mass relays to create a transportation network, then someone had to make them. And if someone made them, that someone might still be in this galaxy. If there is a powerful, ancient civilization here, then the mission just got a lot more complicated.

A plan formed in Shepard's mind.

"EDI, is it possible for us to activate one of these dormant relays?", asked Shepard.

"Yes. Any ship capable of communicating with the relay can turn it on.", said EDI.

Shepard rubbed his chin for a moment, the cogs in his tactical mind turning.

"Okay, listen up. Whoever made these things is very advanced, much more advanced than we are by a long shot. We need to determine if they are friendly or hostile. If they are friendly, perhaps we can get them on our side. If they are hostile, we have to make sure that they don't find their way into our galaxy.", Shepard said.

The others payed attention, waiting for the Commander.

"So here is what we are going to do. It's probable that this race has a monitoring system in place so they can check up on the condition of the network. If that's the case, then the activation of a dormant relay will show up on their system. They'll probably send ships to check it out. We'll be cloaked nearby so we can get a good look at them.

In other words, from this moment forward we're on a recon mission. Our objective is to ascertain whether or not the race that built these relays is friendly or hostile. As stated before, if friendly we will send a message to command. If hostile, we will ensure that they do not reach Earth or her colonies. EDI, can you find any relays that are dormant we can activate?", said Shepard.

"Yes. There is one not too far from here. It is labeled Relay 314. It is currently inactive.", said EDI.

Perfect.

"Alright, Joker set a course for Relay 314. Use slipspace, they might be able to monitor use of this mass relay in which case we would be giving away our position. EDI, run diagnostic on the ship. Make sure everything is working. Everyone else, suit up and be ready for anything. Dismissed.", Shepard said.

_I hope this isn't a mistake. _

* * *

><p>We're finally in the Mass Effect galaxy. I'm sure plenty of you know what's going to happen next, but I assure you: The Haloverse will not go to war with the Citadel Space or Terminus Systems in this fic. I have something else in mind.

**wwefollower: I'm glad you brought that up. The first thing I recommend you do is reread the fic because humans and Sangheili are bitter enemies,not allies. Also, you should reread Chapter 4 because I explain a great deal about how humanity is on par with the Sangheili. **

As for the question on Halo being stonger than Mass Effect, it's pretty simple. Mass Effect ships and soldiers use kinetic barriers, not energy shields. Kinetic barriers will only block projectiles. Since most ship weaponry is either plasma or laser based, Mass Effect ships are completely defenseless.

**Believe me, I've thought about it. There is no way to make Mass

Effect as strong as strong as Haloships without significantly altering canon.**

Anyways, thanks so far everyone. I honestly never thought this fic would be very popular. Thanks for reading.

Remember to keep up the reviews everyone. Audience feedback is always important. Till next chapter!

6. The First Contact

Thanks everyone! Disclaimer: I do not own Mass Effect or Halo.

Author's note: From this point on the story will primarily take place in the Mass Effect galaxy. We'll still visit the Halo galaxy now and then, but not as often.

Also, the Mass Effect galaxy will be slightly different than in the game due to there being no humans in it. I mentioned that at the beginning of the fic. So if you don't like that sort of thing, I'm just giving you a heads up. It's a tad more AU from here.

Bear with me, the story is about to get interesting.

Now that that is out of the way, Chapter 6...

* * *

><p>Miranda sat at her computer while the Normandy soared through slipspace. She continued to type her report to her boss, The Illusive Man. Only he was more than a boss. He was a mentor, the mentor her father had never been. He took her in when no one else would. He saw her potential. Thanks to him, she was a guardian of humanity. Her father would never had let her live to her full potential. No, he would have smothered her with his dynasty. She wasn't even a person to him. Just a doll. A continuation of himself.<p>

Worse, she wasn't the only one. Her sister, Orianna, was destined for the same fate. It made Miranda cringe just thinking about all the things that would have happened if Orianna had stayed.

With the Illusive Man's help, she had been able to protect her. She could hide her from her villain of a father. Her sister could have a life, the life Miranda never could have.

It made Miranda smile. Everyone has something in their life that reminds them who they are. Something worth living for. For Miranda, it was knowing Orianna was safe. It made her feel more human. That was what ONI was about, anyway. Protecting humanity. She would continue to live the way she does as long as it kept Orianna safe.

Of course, like all ONI agents she knew how to temporarily push that humanity aside in order to protect it for everyone else. She was in a shady business and she knew it. Sometimes she wondered if Orianna would understand the things she had done if she knew. Hopefully, she would never have to know. Hopefully she could simply grow up and pursue her dreams. Hopefully, her past will never haunt her. Maybe

she would check in on her later.

Miranda rubbed her head as a splitting headache attacked. She had asked to be augmented with element zero, and that required implanting an L2 implant into your brain. The implant caused a great boost to biotic power, at the cost of the occasional horrible headache. She reached into her desk and took a pain killer to ease the pain. The augmentation was a sacrifice, but sacrifices had to be made to protect human dominance in the galaxy.

Miranda leaned down and finished her report. She couldn't afford to be sidetracked any longer. She had a job to do. The Illusive Man wanted to know everything that was happening on the Normandy. Her report seemed good thus far. The team Shepard chose was well equipped for the job. He really was a tactical genius. The Illusive Man was not wrong about him. He rarely is wrong.

However, for all Shepard's talents, he was also a liability. He was a renegade, a rogue variable that was difficult to control. Shepard didn't care about the law or authority, he cared about victory. Such a person is useful, but dangerous. That is the real reason she was here. Miranda's job was to keep an eye on him.

She looked over the psych profile the operational psychologists had given her on Shepard.

Commander Jack Shepard

Born on Earth, parents unknown. Was in street gang until he enlisted in the UNSC Marines at age 18. After a short period of time, Shepard had proven to be an exceptional leader and tactitian. He also scored marksman scores with his rifle. He had proven himself proficient enough to be allowed entry into the Orbital Drop Shock Troopers, where he again proved himself to be more effective than most other soldiers. He was awarded the rank of Lieutenant and was given his own squad.

_It was at this point ONI took an interest in him. To further test his abilities, ONI ordered several virtual reality squad vs squad exercises. In three out of the five tests, Shepard managed to capture the enemy squad without firing a shot. The other two were more bloody, but efficient nonetheless. _

Having completed the exercises, Shepard was invited into the SPARTAN IV Program. He quickly completed his training and joined N7. From there, his job was to finish the Insurrectionists once and for all. He broke their strongest pocket of resistance at Torfan, at the cost of his squad.

Psych Profile

He seems scarred by what happened on Torfan, but he does not let it interfere with his duties. He wants victory more than anything else.

Shepard was indeed interesting. Reading between the lines, Miranda could tell there was more to it than the file talked about. As long as it didn't interfere with her job, it might be worth investigating.

However, now is not the time. Now, it is time to fill the Illusive Man in on what is happening. Miranda carefully typed up the last few lines of her report, put it in a folder, and hit send.

* * *

><p>Shepard sat at his desk, thinking over the situation. So far everything was going well. His little trip down to the Hangar to visit his team had paid off. He demonstrated his authority and earned their loyalty all in one stroke. Miranda was still a problem, but she could be handled eventually. He just had to find something on her, that one thing that she holds dear. From there, he could either go with blackmail or manipulation, depending on the time he had.<p>

Everyone has a weakness. Even Miranda, the ice queen of ONI. Somewhere beneath her icy personality was something that made her warm, something she loved. It was something that would she would give anything to preserve, to maintain. It could be anything. It could be an ideal. A person. An object. A dream. An idea.

Miranda is not the idealist, so it is unlikely that an ideal is her driving force. She works for ONI, so it is unlikely she has any great dreams she aspires to. For all her beauty, Miranda was not the materialistic sort. She never seemed to carry around a token of her past, so that isn't it either. That left people and ideas. At ONI, you don't frequently work with the same people. If it is a person, then it's someone from her past. An idea from her past could be haunting her. The past is where he would find those answers.

However, that raises another issue. How would Miranda react when the one thing she loves is threatened? What would she do if she lost the one thing that humanizes her? Would she be broken? Would she devolve into an unstoppable rage? If you take away the thing that humanizes someone, what is left?

That was a question even Shepard didn't know the answer to. He had seen something similar happen earlier in his career, but everyone is different. There is no way to know what would happen till it happens.

Shepard made a mental note to look into Miranda's origins and to look for a sore spot.

For now, he would have to put that aside. He had a more immediate problem. If EDI is correct, then it's probable that an incredibly advanced race inhabited or still inhabits this galaxy. The question is whether or not to make contact with them. The last time humanity initiated contact with an alien race, it ended in a genocidal war that nearly destroyed all life in the galaxy. If all goes as planned, they can get a glimpse of these aliens without revealing themselves. The Normandy's cloak can help with that. ONI didn't spend millions of dollars on the ship for nothing.

The real problem would be if this race could find the Normandy. All evidence seems to indicate that this race uses element zero as the basis for their technology. Element Zero manipulates mass, which could lead to some very powerful weaponry. Shepard didn't want to face a race that could potentially create blackholes in battle. If

they unleashed the same genocidal rage the Covenant did, it could be worse than glassing planets. A race as powerful as the makers of the relay could easily cause the stars in our system to go supernova. Humanity wouldn't stand a chance.

He couldn't risk open confrontation with them. Observe only, do not engage. This maxim had served Shepard well. Perhaps it would again.

_Let's just hope that they can't detect us through our cloak.,
_thought Shepard as he leaned back in his chair.

* * *

><p>Ashley, Kaidan, and Vega were all suited up in full armor. Shepard had ordered them to be ready for anything, and every SPARTAN knows that without armor, "anything" could end their lives very quickly. They had also taken the time to look through the armory.<p>

On Pinnacle Station, SPARTANs had to use the gun they were given during the exercise. Now that they were on a mission, they had the opportunity to experiment with new weapons. Since they were a team now, they picked weapons that worked well together.

Ashley had chosen a semi-auto shotgun that looked vaguely like a MAC5 assault rifle, the difference being a longer magazine underneath the barrel. It fired needler crystals that had been crushed up into pellet sized shot. Like needler crystals, they made a small explosion when hitting the target, giving the gun a little extra bang. Better understanding of the technology had allowed military scientists to cause the crystal to behave in strange ways, such as always exploding on impact like the shotgun shells Ashley is using.

She had also chosen two plasma SMGs which she preferred to dual wield in accordance to her up close and personal combat style. They had a higher rate of fire but a smaller energy cell and overheated faster than assault rifles.

Kaidan's weapons were fairly versatile.

Kaidan chose a standard issue PAR-51, the standard plasma assault rifle used by the UNSC. To complement it, he chose a M3A "Spike" Pistol. After the war was over, the UNSC decided to create a sidearm that worked similar to the spiker Brutes had used during the war. It was determined that using the technology in any fashion other than close range would be ineffective. They used this knowledge and created the M3A. It was designed to be a weapon soldiers could pull out and use if an enemy was closing in and they needed to switch to a powerful close quarters weapon quickly.

It works by superheating small metal sphere as it leaves the barrel of the gun, stretching it into a hot spike that pierces flesh. The damage it does is devastating at short range, but is useless at other ranges due to the shape of the round not being designed for range. The spike is much smaller than the Spiker's, but still does tremendous damage to soft targets.

Vega had his pick of weaponry as well, designed to complement his supporting fire role in the team.

He had picked a gauss machine gun as his heavy weapon and a SPARTAN Laser as his second. The SPARTAN laser hadn't changed much since the end of the war, the only real improvement being it's lower charge time and better solution to the heat problem.

It was painful to stare at their new weapons, doing nothing but waiting for their arrival. So they had decided to take a visit to the ship's firing range, where they could practice and compete using their new weapons.

"One more target down. I love my boomstick.", Ashley said while cutting down the virtual targets using her shotgun.

They were facing an army of holographic targets popping up at random accross the VR range.

Vega unleashed a spray of bullets from his gun, destroying several targets.

"Please tell me you're not going to call it that.", said Vega in a sarcastic voice.

Multiple targets showed up on all sides, and Ashley unloaded her shotgun into them one by one, the ground up needler rounds creating tiny explosions seconds after impacting the target.

"I wouldn't be truthful otherwise.", she said.

Kaidan fired controlled bursts from his rifle, allowing him greater control over the heat flowing through it. Each bursts destroyed a target.

"My dad was in the war. He remembered serving in a unit with some guy called Zaeed Massani. He had an assault rifle he named Jesse. Never parted with it the whole war.", said Kaidan. His father had plenty of interesting stories about his fight with the Covenant. He was a marine.

"Really? That sounds weird.", said Vega. The last part was obviously directed at Ashley.

"Yeah, he was a really eccentric guy. He was nearly impossible to kill, too. Took a spike to the head and lived. My dad got seperated from his unit during the fight on Earth. Good thing, too. The whole squad got slaughtered trying to flush out Covenant troops. Zaeed was the only survivor.", continued Kaidan. He killed a few more targets.

"One of these days I want to meet this guy.", said Ashley as she expertly killed four targets in lightning succession.

The clock was winding down on the firing range, and finally stopped. All targets disappeared. The group put down their weapons and reloaded, which was the SPARTAN equivalent of a respite.

"Who won?", asked Ashley.

All three looked at the score display screen. Vega was ahead of Ashley by five and Kaidan by seven.

"Hail to the chief, baby.", said the victorious Vega. You couldn't see it for his helmet, but the others knew he was smiling.

"Please, you only won because of that machine gun. If this were an open field I would beat you both.", said Kaidan while trying to dismiss Vega's victory.

"Is that a challenge?", asked Vega. The smile was most definately still there.

"This ship has a VR simulator. You wanna go?", asked Kaidan.

"Yeah, I wanna go.", said the smug victor Vega.

Ashley just folded her arms and then shook her head. The SPARTANs were about to leave for the VR simulator when Shepard's commanding voice came over the intercomm.

"All hands, report to the CIC immediately. Arrival at our destination is imminent. I repeat, report to the CIC."

The SPARTANs grabbed their weapons and marched as quickly as they could to the CIC.

* * *

><p>When the SPARTANs arrived, the whole crew was there. Joker had even left his cockpit to join them in the meeting. There were no chairs, so everyone remained standing.<p>

Shepard was in full armor, holding his helmet at his side. He wore the Recon variant of the SPARTAN armor, providing him with excellent stealth capabilities. The armor was designed to reduce infrared signature. The Recon variant was also designed with built in active camouflauge. The SPARTAN IV model, which Shepard was wearing, also allowed the ability to see infrared signatures through walls.

Shepard stepped forward, once again commanding authority. When he was certain he had everyone's undivided attention, the Commander began.

"We are about to arrive at the checkpoint. You all heard the plan before. If all goes well, we'll be able to get a glimpse of this race without them noticing us. However, everyone here knows that things don't always go according to plan.", Shepard said.

"So I came up with a contingency if we get spotted. EDI,", Shepard stared at her avatar," for now, you're at the helm of the ship. Joker, you're going to the cryo chamber.", Shepard said. Joker's face betrayed his unhappiness about the idea, but he would go along.

Shepard looked at his three SPARTANs and handed them three magnetic devices.

"This is active camo. It's not as good as mine, so don't use it till I say so.", Shepard said.

He then turned to Miranda, who was wondering what odd gift she was about to receive. She soon found out as Shepard handed her a breath mask, an active camo device, and a M6C/SOCOM silenced pistol.

"Put these on.", he said while eyeing her suspiciously.

"Alright, listen up because I'm only going to say this once. We don't know anything about this race. We don't know if they're friendly or hostile. We don't know if we can take them in battle. If we get spotted, EDI, I want you to turn off everything. Life support, engines, shields, everything. Leave us dead in space. Then, send a distress signal. The aliens will probably board the ship to investigate. EDI, you have the floor lights lead into cryo.

The Aliens will follow the floor lights into cryo and investigate Joker, at which point we will incapacitate them and capture them. Then, EDI will cause the ship to jump into slipspace to a random location where we will interrogate our prisoners. Understood?", said Shepard.

They all nodded and began putting on their new equipment. Vega and Miranda took up positions inside the CIC. Ashley and Kaidan escorted Joker to cryo and hid inside, waiting to execute Shepard's orders if necessary. Shepard followed.

The Normandy dropped out of slipspace.

"EDI, execute.", said Shepard before activating his active camo.

"Yes sir. Activating Relay 314. I will raise cloak after doing so.", EDI said.

Now, all they could do is wait.

* * *

><p>General Orina sat in the CIC, watching her subordinates manage the ship. Being a General isn't all it's cracked up to be. She learned that the first day on the job. The majority of the time, the job is mindnumbingly boring. The Turian military is a well oiled machine. She didn't usually have to order her subordinates to do anything. Most of the time she just read reports. She hardly even got to determine their destination. If the Hierarchy needed her battlegroup to be somewhere, they told her. All she did was relay orders. It could be a boring job.<p>

On the flip side, her job being exciting is usually a very bad thing, because it means something has gone wrong. Either way, being a General was not as amazing as many other young Turians think.

The feeling was made worse by knowing that traitor Saren was out there with his Geth army, destroying planets and countless lives. If she had to be a general, she wanted to do something useful. Not use her battle group to patrol for pirates. Her group should be on the frontline, turning those flashlight heads into heaps of metal. This was torture.

However, she was a good Turian. She would follow orders. Unlike her Spectre guest. She couldn't help but think that he had something to

do with her being here. She could ask, but it usually isn't wise to interfere with Spectres. It was an annoying position to be in.

So she simply watched as the crew went by. Scanning planets for pirates, test firing the mass accelerator, scanning to see if any mass relays were being activated...

"Mam, I think you should see this.", a young Turian ensign said.

She wrote it off. She didn't need to see another asteroid that looked like an Asari's head. Still, she should at least make sure it isn't anything. That's what a good officer does.

"What is it?", she said with a tired tone.

"I think a new Mass Relay has been activated in this area. The previously dormant Relay 314.", the ensign said.

Looks like today, her job was going to be exciting after all.

She walked towards him and leaned next to his console.

"How long ago was it activated?", she asked sincerely.

"It's in the middle of being activated right now.", the ensign said.

Right now? We could catch them in the act! Maybe this trip wasn't so insignificant after all.

She stepped back into the center of the CIC.

"Attention, this is General Orina. All ships jump to Relay 314.", she ordered accross the entire battlegroup.

One by one the ships went into FTL, starting with the Frigates, then the Cruisers, then the Dreadnought the General and the Spectre are on.

* * *

><p>Multiple ships dropped out of FTL right around the relay as EDI tried to activate it.<p>

"Shepard, it seems a group of ships have arrived. They appear military in nature. We are still in the process of activating the relay. Your orders?", EDI asked Shepard.

Shepard and the others were in position for plan B, but he didn't want to use it unless absolutely necessary. Aliens could potentially be anything. He didn't want to expose the ship to an unknown variable unless he had to.

A whole battlegroup of ships? What are they afraid of?, thought Shepard.

"Can we put the cloak up in time?", asked Shepard.

"No. We will be spotted before I can fully cloak the Normandy.", EDI said. It usually took a few minutes for the cloak to cover the ship,

and they didn't have a few minutes to spare.

Shepard looked down and sighed.

"Alright, plan B everyone. EDI, cut the power. Active camo on. Activate magnetic boots. Helmet to helmet comms only. EDI, hide. Remember, we want these aliens alive. Nonlethal incapacitation only. Understood?", Shepard said.

"Understood.", the other said in unison over the helmet to helmet comms.

Then, the power completely cut off, leaving the ship dead in space.

* * *

><p>Garrus Vakarian had lived an interesting life. Hard nosed cop on the Citadel for a while. Omega vigilante for a few months after that. Then, Saren struck. Just like he knew he would. He had Saren in his grasp, only for red tape and politics to get in the way. That was enough to tick anyone off. He had a mass murderer and a traitor in his grasp. He could have stopped him. But it was too late.<p>

Of course, the Council had been more than happy to make him a Spectre and put him in charge of hunting Saren down after he killed hundreds of people in cold blood. No matter what, he couldn't go back and change that now.

Now, he had to stop Saren.

From what he knew, Saren seemed to be targeting planets with Prothean artifacts. It didn't really matter how big or small the population, or even how well defended the planet was. The only consistent variable was the Prothean artifacts he had been visiting.

Recently, there had been a Prothean digsite in this area. It hasn't unearthed anything major, just a few clay pots. Still, it was one of the known prothean digsites left. It was his only lead, even if it was slight.

If it's artifacts he's after, how do I know he is only looking for Prothean artifacts? What if he's targeting Klencory where that crazy Volus is looking for "crypts of beings of light" or some nonsense? For all I know he could be planning to rob a museum. There just isn't enough to go on. Maybe I'll go to the CIC, check on the General.

Garrus felt a little bad about pulling General Orina away from the front, but wherever Saren went he took a massive dreadnought and an army of Geth. A whole battlegroup is hardly a defense, but it's the best the Hierarchy could do.

Garrus exited his quarters and into the crowded hall of the dreadnought. After a short walk while listening to his favorite music on his eye apparatus, he finally reached the elevator. From there it was just a matter of weaving his way through the ship and into the CIC.

General Orina seemed to be in a much tenser stance than when Garrus

last spoke to her, and it didn't take long for him to look out a window and see they were in FTL.

I thought we were going to stay on course.

"General, what are you up to? I guess you have a good reason for that stern face and the sudden jump to FTL?", asked Garrus in his sly manner.

"Someone is trying to open a Mass Relay, and we've caught them in the act. We should be back on course in a moment. It's probably just pirates looking for a new hideout. After what happened with the Rachni you'd think that they would quit doing things like this.", she said.

"We have arrived, General.", an ensign said.

Orina stepped forward and gave her ensigns a look.

"Report. What's the situation?", she asked.

An ensign looked up from his control pod.

"There is a ship, but it's very strange. It doesn't match any designs we've seen. It's dead in space, sending a distress signal in a very strange code or language. Not any I know of.", the ensign said. He looked perplexed.

General Orina and Garrus looked at each other with the same frown.

Strange ships don't just show up out of nowhere, especially next to a once inactive relay. Add the strange language that has never been heard of, and it's possible they were facing a first contact scenario. Normally, standard operating procedure is to wait for diplomats to arrive and allow them to make first contact, but if the ship was dead in space they didn't have that kind of time. It was probable that this race has to breath.

On the other hand, this was very fishy. Pirates are some of the most creative criminals around. This could be a new ruse to lure ships into a trap. Either way, it was worth an investigation.

"Get the language down to our linguists, see what they can make of it.", General Orina ordered.

"Something doesn't feel right about this.", Garrus said.

"I agree, but we can't just leave them out there to die. If this is a first contact scenario, then leaving them for dead wouldn't exactly leave a good impression.", General Orina said.

Garrus couldn't argue with that logic. The last thing they needed to do was tick off a powerful race and have them storm through the relay. Saren was bad enough. Between the Batarians, the Terminus Systems, the Geth, and countless other criminal organizations, Citadel space didn't need another enemy.

"Alright, let me go in and check it out. I'll let you know what I find.", said Garrus. He turned to walk away, but Orina stopped

him.

"You should take two of my crew. I wouldn't recommend going this one alone.", she said.

Garrus knew she was probably right. Even someone as skilled as Garrus could get into trouble going it alone, especially in an unknown environment.

But he couldn't. The fate of his team on Omega still haunted him, like burning oil he couldn't wash off. Killing Sidonis satisfied him at first, but it didn't last. Knowing he led some of the few good people on Omega to their death was a worse scar than the one he received during his narrow escape from the station. He couldn't stand to lead again, not if it meant leading others to their graves. No, this one he would go alone.

"I appreciate the offer, General, but I think I can do this best alone. Just keep track of the ship, I'll be fine. If I can survive three of the galaxy's toughest criminal organizations, I think I can survive a strange looking space ship.", said Garrus in his usual smooth tone.

Orina's face showed disapproval, but she had no authority over the Spectre.

"Be careful.", Orina said.

Garrus then set off for the shuttle bay.

* * *

><p>Garrus piloted his Kodiak shuttle around the vessel, getting a good look at the ship. It was certainly strange. It wasn't sleek enough to be Asari. It's design almost looked Turian. No, it was more than that. It looked like it would be the product of Turians and Krogan working together to build a ship. It was military, had to be. Military means the mission just got more complicated. A military ship almost certainly has automated defenses.<p>

He had to risk it. Leaving people to die left a bad taste in his mouth.

Garrus pulled his shuttle around to an air lock and connected the ship to the shuttle. Garrus put on his helmet and opened the door to the strange ship. He stepped inside and began to look around, his curiosity piqued.

* * *

><p>"I see him.", Miranda said to the team over helmet to helmet comms. She was hiding in the CIC, waiting for anything to come through the door. Vega was with her in case things got ugly.<p>

"He's wearing blue armor and a weird blue helmet.", Vega continued. He had his active camo on as well. He trained his gun on the alien, ready to fire the minute something went wrong.

"Understood. Kaidan, Ashley, stay with me in cryo. I don't know how

strong this guy is, it may take three of us to restrain him. We can't use drugs because we don't know how it will affect his biology.", said Shepard.

The alien noticed the red panic lights along the floor leading to cryo.

"He's taking the bait.", Vega said. Everyone prepared themselves for the next step.

* * *

><p>Garrus's investigation of the ship had yielded little to note. It was similar to a turian ship, yet different in an undescrivable way. It was like the ship was a weird cross between military and something else. He couldn't get the something else just yet.<p>

The ship didn't seem very unusual, even if it was an alien ship. There seemed to be a CIC area similar to that of a Turian ship.

Maybe whoever these people are aren't so different after all.

So far he hadn't noticed any weapon caches. The bridge was empty. Garrus continued his exploration of the ship by opening a door. He then noticed the red panic lights along the floor. They were leading into a specific room.

I don't like this...

Garrus grabbed his assault rifle and tucked it against his shoulder, carefully checking every direction for hostiles. None.

He carefully walked into the room. It was cold, very cold. Pods lined the walls, all of them seemed empty. Except one.

Garrus turned his head and noticed the inhabitant of the pod. It was an odd looking creature. Similar body structure to the asari, yet more masculine. It looked as if fine brown fibers covered his chin and head. His skin was pale. Garrus also couldn't help but notice the very strange hat he was wearing. It fit around his head, but it seemed like a small board was protruding from it.

Why anyone would wear such a hat was beyond him.

Garrus took a cursory look at the other pods and realized they were all empty.

So far, just one survivor. That didn't make any sense. This ship is fairly large. It would take several people to manage it. Not to mention all the unfilled pods. Where could they have gone?

Unless...

It's a trap!

Garrus noticed movement out of the corner of his eye. He reached for his weapon, but was too late.

* * *

><p>The alien was looking at Joker, carefully analyzing him. They couldn't see his face for the alien's odd swept back helmet, but it's body language betrayed it's thoughts. It seemed perplexed. He seemed to be staring at Joker's hat. Then the alien moved back, as if he were thinking about something else. Shepard realized what it was.<p>

He's a clever one.

"Alright everyone, move!", Shepard said.

The team executed their plan. Kaidan froze the alien in a biotic field, after which the Commander and Ashley grabbed the alien and shouldered him. He was fairly heavy, but no challenge for the super soldiers.

Kaidan kept the alien frozen while the Commander and Ashley moved him into the elevator, which had been partially powered up for this phase of the plan. They took it down into one of the lowest areas of the ship, the Brig. After a short march, they deposited their burden into the brig and locked the door. Kaidan let go of him.

"Good job. Ashley, you guard him for the time being.", Shepard said over the comms.

"EDI, turn us back on and get us out of here.", Shepard said.

Upon that order, the ship powered up and went into slipspace, leaving the aliens behind.

* * *

><p>General Orina carefully watched the ship. She knew something was up, she just couldn't put her finger on it. Garrus shouldn't have gone in alone. Maybe she should call in.<p>

"Ensign, call Garrus and tell him to hurry-"

Her sentence was cut short by the mysterious ship powering back up. A strange portal opened in front of it, and the ship flew straight into it, completely disappearing.

"Was that a wormhole?", asked one of the ensigns with amazement. Orina glared at him for not thinking of Garrus.

"Ensign, where did that ship go?", asked Orina frantically.

"I don't know, mam. Sensors can't track it. We've never seen this kind of technology before.", he said.

Orina paced for a brief moment, giving herself a little time to think about her next move. She couldn't chase after him. That left her one option.

"Call the Council, tell them we might have a hostile alien race on our hands with new technology."

And today was just supposed to be another boring day as a

General.

I hope this isn't the Rachni all over again.

* * *

><p>Well everyone, now we're getting into the meat and potatoes of the story. I'm sorry if you were expecting an epic showdown between the UNSC and the Turians, but that's been done hundreds of times. I wanted to do something a little more original with the first contact.

**arbiter650- Thanks for informing me about that. I'll be sure to come up with an explanation when we get back to that part of the story. **

** I hope you've enjoyed this chapter. Be sure to review, and I'll have the next chapter up as soon as it's ready. As long as someone enjoys this fic, I'll keep writing. Till next chapter.**

7. The Interrogation

Thanks everyone! Enjoy!

Disclaimer: I own neither Mass Effect or Halo.

* * *

><p>Citadel

Council Meeting room

The Citadel Council met in a special meeting room in the Citadel Tower. When they were addressing another race, they would go into another area of the tower where they could stand and face the people with the problem. Today, they were meeting among themselves. The room provided a magnificent view of the cloudy purple enviroment surrounding the colossal space station. It was the heart of the galaxy.

The Citadel Council was one of the most powerful organizations in the galaxy. They had the power to bring member races in line with what they wanted, even though they tried to remain impartial. Every race on the Council had a role to play.

Turians were the military arm of the Council, enforcing it's laws. They had the might and discipline to do so, and had earned their way into this elite group by stopping the Krogan Rebellions.

The Salarians were great scientists and spies. They held great pride in their intellectuals. They were the second race to find the Citadel, and simply walked into their position of power.

The Asari were many things. Their long life span allowed them to be more varied than other races. Some lived wildly, choosing to slum around nightclubs. Some chose to be soldiers and use their naturally powerful biotics. Others chose to be great diplomats, trying to smooth things over with other races. All of them were beautiful.

The tides of history had shaped the ivory tower of the Citadel Council. Times would come when peace would reign, and then they would be dashed by a great catastrophe. The Rachni Wars, the Geth Revolt, and the Krogan Rebellions were just a few.

Afterwards, the galaxy would once again fall into a state of serenity. During these times the Council would look out at the stars and in their arrogance declare themselves the rulers of the greatest power in the galaxy, only for trouble to answer their call.

So now trouble had come once again, to answer their arrogance.

Saren was threatening the galaxy with his unstoppable army of Geth, and they still had no way to stop him. Suddenly they didn't feel like the almighty rulers of the galaxy anymore. Now they realized their mortality.

However, there was potentially a worse problem on the horizon. That is what prompted the emergency session today.

It had taken less than an hour for General Orina's report to reach Councilor Sparatus's desk, and the news was grave indeed. He had called an emergency session with his fellow councilors to determine their course of action.

The Asari representative, Councilor Tevos arrived first after Sparatus. Even her usually calm demeanor could not hide the concern on her face. She had met some of the fiercest opposition and had always managed to smooth things over while maintaining a diplomatic expression. To see her break this pattern was especially troubling.

The Salarian representative, Councilor Velarn, arrived next in a hurried fashion. He was second only to Tevos in his calmness, and he too seemed troubled.

This was unusual behavior for them all. However, it was fitting for the situation.

The three Councilors took a seat at a table placed in the oddly friendly and secure room. Amazing how it contrasted the current situation.

Councilor Sparatus began first.

"As we all know, about an hour ago an unknown alien vessel kidnapped a Spectre, Garrus Vakarian. This vessel used technology we have never seen, eye witness accounts describe it as some kind of portal that opened. The ship flew through it and vanished without a trace. Opinions?", said the Turian in a very grave voice.

The Salarian Councilor rubbed his chin, thinking it over.

"A portal? This could be some new form of FTL. If so, they are either advanced enough that they have found a new way to use element zero, or they have somehow achieved faster than light travel without it. With technology such as this, they may not have to rely on mass relays for long distance space travel.", said Velarn. His reptilian black eyes squinted in deep thought.

Sparatus shook his head.

"That would be very bad. All modern military space strategy revolves around using Mass Relays as choke points. If they can travel to any system without the relays, then they could potentially attack anywhere and we would never reach the battle in time to fend them off.

Worse, kidnapping someone, a Spectre no less, is a clear act of aggression. The military is having a hard enough time stopping Saren. We can't fight two wars at once.", said Sparatus.

No one said it, but everyone was thinking the same thing. This could be the Rachni Wars all over again, and this time they don't have an ace in the hole.

"Perhaps they didn't mean to take him. The report said the ship was dead in space. Isn't it possible that whatever race this is managed to fix the problem and simply took off without realizing that an alien was still on board?", said Tevos while trying to inject some hope into the situation.

The other councilors didn't buy it. None of them wanted to believe that a powerful alien race was about to conquer their civilization, but the possibility existed. They had to think the unthinkable.

Garrus was a Spectre, so he was unlikely to break and tell the aliens anything. That also meant he had vital galactic secrets regarding galactic security. Of course, it would only be a matter of time before they followed the mass relays to their planets. At least they wouldn't know anything about top secret military projects or troop deployment areas.

They had to do something about this development. The people were counting on them. Standing by and doing nothing would accomplish nothing.

"What do you propose we do?", asked Councilor Velarn. Both he and Tevos were staring at Sparatus.

He looked down at the table for a moment.

"We may need to prepare the galaxy for total warfare. Institute a draft for all able bodied soldiers. We may need to shift factory production from civilian goods to military equipment. We may also have to retrofit civilian ships to augment the fleets.", Sparatus said.

Tevos wanted to speak out against such measures. On another occasion she would. But she didn't want to be known as the Councilor who let millions of people die because they were unprepared.

Even so, she could not allow all these measures. They would cause panic, whereas they needed composure.

"I don't think that is the best way to handle this. If we plunge into total war, the public will panic. I recommend that we prepare to implement such measures if necessary, but hold off on doing so until we have more information.", Tevos said.

The Salarian councilor nodded his head in agreement.

Sparatus didn't like the idea, but he was outnumbered. He had to go along with the decision.

"Very well. I will inform the Hierarchy of our recommendation. They will most likely accept.", said Sparatus.

"The Salarians and Asari will do the same. If that is all, I declare this meeting adjourned.", said the Asari councilor.

All three Councilors rose from their chairs and silently left the warmth and security of the room. All of them still felt uneasy.

They were arrogant. They thought they were the masters of all. They called out into the depths of space, declaring their glory. Trouble had answered their call.

They all now rued the day of reckoning. The day when the Citadel would fall.

* * *

><p>UNSC Normandy

Location Unknown

The Normandy dropped out of slipspace after a good long journey to the middle of nowhere. They might have kept going, but the Normandy had to stop to rest the slipspace drive. Staying in slipspace tended to cause problems, and no one was out here to help them if something went wrong.

"Joker, as soon as we're ready jump us to slipspace. I don't want them getting a fix on us.", ordered Shepard.

"Aye Commander.", he said. Joker was just glad to be out of cryo. He hated being treated like a frozen pizza. Despite improvements in cryogenics, it never feels good to get stuffed in a freezer.

Shepard and Miranda had been observing the alien for quite a while, observing it's behavior. It seemed to figure out there was a camera on the ceiling. He looked up and did what Shepard thought was a defiant smile into the camera.

The creature was very strange looking. It's behavior was almost human, but it's appearance was strange. It had mandibles, but it's mouth moved up and down like a human's. It had a crest of cartilage, bone or some other biological feature. It seemed like a bizarre cross between an avian creature and a dinosaur. It was almost like a more bird-like Sangheili.

It was clear from the interesting rifle it brought that it was military. It also had great instincts if it could see through Shepard's plan, even if it was too late. If he were human, he would definitely be on Shepard's team.

Vega had relieved Ashley from her guard duty and was watching the prisoner. Even SPARTANs got bored, so changing shifts was a good way

to avoid cabin fever. Shepard issued a standing order to keep their helmets on until he ordered them off. He didn't want the alien to see what they looked like. The goal was to let the alien know as little about humans while learning the most about the aliens.

Shepard wanted to leave the alien in it's cell for a while, let it think over the situation. The police would call it "letting the suspect sweat", but this prisoner was too defiant for that. Defiant. Would it attempt escape? That would be a sight to see. It escapes the brig and finds out that it's in the middle of slipspace. He needed to interrogate it soon. Until then, there were other things to do.

"EDI, have you made any progress figuring out how it's weapon works?", asked Shepard. Everyone was interested in it. It seemed like an assault rifle of some sort. It could be a good addition to the UNSC's armory.

"I think so. As far as I can tell, it uses element zero to lower the mass of metal and fires them at high speed. It would shred most targets. It could potentially fire alternate rounds.", EDI said.

That caught everyone's attention.

"What do you mean 'alternate rounds'?", asked Ashley.

"With proper modifications, it could fire flaming rounds, electrically charged rounds, rounds designed to incapacitate only, rounds that freeze the target, ect. There is quite a bit of potential for a weapon like this.", said EDI.

Everyone liked the sound of that.

"What about ammo?", asked Kaidan.

"Ammo isn't a problem. The only thing that limits the technology is a heat problem, and I think we can solve that by adapting the plasma heat capacitors for the gun.", EDI said.

This could potentially be very powerful technology. The gun was like a full auto miniaturized MAC cannon, and used less energy. With the right modifications, such a weapon could make a large portion of the UNSC arsenal obsolete.

Shepard walked over to it and picked the weapon up. It was surprisingly light, weighing much less than a UNSC weapon.

Shepard smiled while looking at the gun.

I'd like to see the expression the Sangheili give if they saw one thousand UNSC Marines charging down a hill with these in their hands.

The only real drawback was that it couldn't fire plasma, but plasma weapons had proven too impractical as infantry weapons anyway. They couldn't be miniaturized effectively because of the heat problem, and for most weapons the UNSC produced and a significant number of Sangheili weapons, no matter how good your heat capacitors were they just couldn't stand up to sustained fire. Plasma weapons were also

expensive to make, which was the reason why Gauss weapons still exist. Plasma was only practical for larger weapons like machine guns and cannons. There were some practical plasma weapons, but they still weren't easy to mass produce.

For small arms, a weapon like this could change warfare forever. The weapon essentially consisted of ammo, a power source, element zero, a barrel, and a trigger. Such a gun could be mass produced in huge quantities and be just as effective as a plasma weapon.

Not only that, it was the perfect weapon to start an arms race with the Sangheili. If the Alliance could hide it's source of element zero, the Sangheili would have no way of producing these weapons. All the UNSC has to do is get enough element zero to mass produce...

Which leads to another question: Does element zero naturally occur in this galaxy? That would be a good question to ask their prisoner. If so, Shepard might be able to smuggle some out. Or even better, establish some kind of mining operation.

Shepard thought of the time. Now was a good time to begin the interrogation.

Shepard walked over to the video screen showing the prisoner, taking another good look at him.

Miranda was still studying him as well. They both stared at the alien for a minute or so, trying to think about what should be done. Then Shepard spoke.

"Suggestions?", asked Shepard while continueing to stare at the screen.

Miranda turned and faced Shepard.

"We've waited long enough. We should begin interrogation.", she said.

Shepard rubbed his chin. He laid his helmet on a table.

"What's our interrogation strategy?", Shepard asked. He wanted to see what Miranda would say. Every bit of insight into her mind would make it easier for Shepard to get in. He knew she was sending reports to the Illusive Man, and he knew there was going to be a time when he would have to hide something from him.

Ashley stepped forward with a suggestion.

"We could beat it out of him. I'm sure he wouldn't last long with two of us in there with him."

Miranda frowned at that. She worked for ONI, she knew how to interrogate prisoners. There was a time and place for torture. This was neither.

"I disagree. Look at his behavior. He's cocky, defiant. He would resist us to the death. Beating him up won't yield anything useful. I suggest we drug him, then coerce information out of him.", Miranda said.

Shepard continued to stare at the screen, observing their guest.

"I'm inclined to agree. He sees surviving his capture as a challenge. He taunts us by smiling at the camera. On the other hand, I'm not going to risk drugging him. We don't know anything about his physiology. The drug might kill him. No, we're going to have to come up with something else.", said Shepard. He was still deep in thought, trying to figure out a solution.

Kaidan leaned against the wall.

"Aren't we all overlooking something?", Kaidan said.

The others turned to look at him.

"We just kidnapped a soldier from an alien race we know nothing about. Was this a good idea? Do we really need more enemies? And what about the language barrier? How are we going to get past that?", Kaidan said in an unusually pessimistic tone.

EDI's avatar appeared in the room to provide an explanation.

"The alien was wearing a universal translator device. I have modified it with our language so we can communicate with it. I also checked for other languages, and it seems like there is a vast amount of languages, more than one race could possibly invent. It seems there are other races of aliens in this galaxy.", EDI said.

Everyone was a little concerned about that. Ticking off one race was one thing, a whole galaxy was another.

"Listen. I only kidnapped the alien because I need to know what we're up against. After the contact with the Covenant, first contact protocol says to assume any new race is hostile till proven otherwise. Hopefully, this guy can prove otherwise. He may also have information on the other races of this galaxy.

Our job is to protect humanity at all costs. I just couldn't take the chance this race is friendly. They deployed a whole battlegroup to investigate the relay. For all we know, we wouldn't stand a chance against them. Survival and preservation of the human race is the goal for the moment. If it turns out they're friendly, we'll see what we can do then.

After what happened with the Covenant, we need to take proper precautions. Besides, if they are friendly we can recover from this. If they aren't, then we have to do what we must to protect humanity from them.", Shepard said.

They all knew Shepard was right. Humanity can't really trust others. Not after the Covenant. If this alien race is friendly, then perhaps they could be allies. Maybe one day they could even be friends. Until then, it would be naive to assume that they are.

They could have stalked accross the galaxy, slowly gathering information under cloak. However, they didn't have unlimited supplies. They needed information, and they needed it quick. They had to send a report to Hackett soon, and Shepard wanted something to

give him.

That was the original plan. Observe only. However, they were spotted. That changed things. They couldn't do it the slow way anymore. Now, they were running out of time.

Which meant there was only one way to get what they need.

"Kaidan, toss me that universal translator.", said Shepard.

Kaidan walked over and handed it to him.

"This guy is expecting Stalin to walk through that door and torture him to death.", said Shepard as he put his helmet back on.

"So what are you going to do?", asked Miranda.

Shepard walked forward and reached the elevator. He stepped inside and turned around, facing the crew just before the doors closed.

"Surprise him."

* * *

><p>The brig was a very sterile room. The walls were painted dull gray, and the room consisted of ten cells, each encased in metal bars. The atmosphere was stale. Devoid of meaning or flavor. It was boring.<p>

Garrus sat in his cell. He knew he couldn't have been there long, but it felt like days had past by. They had taken all of his equipment. His gun, his helmet, even his trusty eyepiece. His pals at C-SEC used to say it was the coolest monocle in the galaxy. Those were the days.

At least this place had breathable atmosphere. Aside from the cryogenecally frozen alien, he hadn't any of his captors' faces. As far as he could tell, they all wore powerful armor. They also had above average biotic abilities, judging by how strong the biotic field that put him in down was.

Garrus thought over his situation.

They kept him alive, so they must want information. They will probably torture him to get what they want, but he'll never break. Garrus made a point to periodically smile at the camera they had installed on the ceiling to keep an eye on him. He wondered if his taunts were getting through to them.

They didn't seem to do much against his guard, that lumbering armored hulk. He carried what looked like some kind of machine gun. There was no getting past these guys in combat, at least aboard this ship. They were too strong. He had no choice but to wait.

He didn't have to wait long.

Another one of the armored beings walked into the room. He was wearing a helmet as well. His armor wasn't as bulky as the guards, but it was certainly powerful. No, it was more than just armor. It

was an armored exoskeleton. That would explain how they are so freakishly strong. Or they were just naturally strong, but Garrus didn't want to entertain the possibility of a race that was the size of a Turian but as strong as a Krogan.

"Leave us.", the new one said. He must be the leader. It surprised Garrus that he could understand this being. Could he have the universal translator?

The larger guard got up and left the room. Garrus sat on his bunk and made no moves. He was completely still, waiting for whatever torture the being was about to inflict upon him.

Instead, the alien pulled up a chair and removed his helmet.

"Hello. I am Commander Shepard. You are?", asked Shepard.

This caught Garrus off guard. He was expecting brutal torture, not a friendly conversation. He wasn't sure what he should do. So he simply didn't answer, waiting for more.

"Look, I understand your reservations. I did kidnap you, after all. But I did not do so out of malice. It was purely out of curiosity. My people do not look for trouble. Stumbleing accross this 'mass relay' of yours was quite an interesting discovery.", Shepard said.

He was trying to make humans seem as intriguing as possible. Garrus seemed to have a competitive spirit. He may start revealing things if he gives into his urges to compare his race to humanity.

Garrus decided to go on the offensive, not realizing he was falling into Shepard's trap.

"Who are you?", asked Garrus. Shepard saw his opening and began.

"I am Commander Shepard, a powerful soldier among my people. This ship is under my command.", said Shepard. If he could make himself seem superior, Garrus would reveal his personal history to him. From there, it was a simple matter.

Garrus took the bait.

"I'm a Spectre, one of the special operations soldiers of my government.", he said with a sly smile.

Hmm. Spectres. Shepard needed to know more about these units.

"I doubt it's the highest unit in your government. It doesn't sound too special to me.", Shepard said arrogantly.

Garrus rose to his defense, slightly angered by Shepard's attempts to belittle the Spectres and by extension himself.

"We are the right hand of the Council. We can do whatever we want as long as it protect's the Council's interests.", Garrus said.

Garrus was in neck deep now and didn't even know it.

"Council? That's the name of your government? Could you find a more cliché name? Do they live in a great tree or something?", said

Shepard. He made sure to make the alien angry enough to talk.

It worked.

"No, the Council is not the name of my government. My species' government is the Turian Hierarchy. The Council is a collaboration of the three most powerful species to protect the galaxy. We are the military wing, and we are very, very powerful. And they don't live in a tree, they live in a space station, the Citadel! I doubt your government could be more civilized than that.", Garrus shouted in an outburst. He couldn't stand Shepard essentially declaring his civilization inferior.

Immediately after his outburst Garrus's mouth dropped. He had answered Shepard's questions without even knowing it. Shepard was smart. Always one step ahead of everyone else.

"Maybe you're right. Your civilization doesn't seem so bad after all. I enjoyed the little chat we had. Perhaps I will stop by later and continue where we left off. I'll see you.", said Shepard.

After that, Shepard grabbed his helmet and exited the room. The larger being stepped back in, careful to guard the prisoner.

Garrus sat back down on his bunk with a smile. He couldn't help but admire this "Shepard". He was a worthy opponent indeed.

* * *

><p>The elevator arrived back in the CIC soon after the interrogation. The whole crew stared at him as he walked into the center of the room with the rest of his team.<p>

"Well, that was possibly the most creative interrogation I've ever seen.", Miranda said with her arms crossed.

"Yeah, how did you even know he would answer?", Kaidan continued for Miranda.

Shepard placed his helmet on the table and smiled. He knew exactly why. Shepard saw himself in that alien. He saw the person he used to be. He saw the young and eager Shepard, always wanting to show everyone up, unwilling to pick and choose his battles wisely. He saw himself when he still felt alive, when he was more than a machine sent to do a job. He saw himself before Torfan.

He finally responded to the question.

"I knew he would answer because he's like me. He couldn't stand not being on top. He wanted to beat me. He wanted his civilization to top ours, so I used that. He never saw it coming.", said Shepard.

Judging from the facial expressions of the others, they thought it was smooth.

Miranda, however, wanted to get back to business.

"Alright, now that we have new intel, what are we going to do?", she asked.

The others looked like they were putting their thinking caps on.

"I think I want to risk going to the Citadel. If it's the heart of their government, it would be the best place to make first contact. It's too late to turn back now. Besides, I didn't get the impression that they wanted war with anyone.", said Shepard.

Kaidan shook his head.

"I doubt they would just welcome us with open arms after kidnapping one of their agents.", he said.

Shepard went and looked out a window on the Normandy. They had traveled to another galaxy and were still facing problems like this.

"They might with the alien's endorsment.", Shepard said while turning towards the crew.

"How are we going to get that? I doubt that trick you did earlier will work twice.", said Ashley with her arms folded.

Shepard was growing tired of the pessimistic attitude.

"Listen up. There is no turning back now. We're going to the Citadel. Now drop the attitude, or I'll make you drop it. We'll figure out a way.", Shepard said sternly.

Everyone stood at attention.

"Yes Sir."

Shepard smiled at his team. He knew he had picked them right. Morale should improve soon enough.

A thought suddenly formed inside Shepard's mind. He didn't know where the Citadel was. He needed to get there.

Shepard leaned against the holographic command table in the CIC and thought for a moment.

If this "Citadel" was the heart of the galaxy, then it's probable that several mass relays intersected it. If that's the case, they should be able to trace it's location through the star map.

"EDI, find the center of the relay network. Joker, once she's done, take us there."

Miranda gave him a suspicious look.

"What are you going to do?", she said.

"I'm going to convince the alien to help us.", Shepard said. The others could feel his desire to win in his voice. He was Commander Shepard. They knew he would.

* * *

><p>Garrus continued to sit in his cell, thinking about his next

move. He had to make sure Shepard didn't one up him like he did last time. He got cocky, and that cost him. Who knows what the aliens will do with the information. He may have failed everyone. If a powerful race was going to come and kill everyone, it was his fault. He told them everything.<p>

The leader, Shepard, walked through the door once again. He was wearing the same armor he wore last time, and was holding his helmet at his side.

Garrus readied himself for another interrogation. He wasn't going to lose this time.

"Open the cell, Vega.", Shepard said.

The large one complied and the cell door was opened.

Garrus was again dumbfounded. This race had very strange interrogation tactics.

Shepard motioned for him to step out of the cell.

Garrus was suspicious, but decided to go anyway. Staying in the cell wasn't going to help him.

Shepard handed Garrus his eye piece, which Garrus quickly took away and put back on. He never took off his eye piece, no matter what.

He was still perplexed as to what was going on.

"Alright, Shepard. What are you after?", Garrus said.

Shepard took a seat and leaned back in his chair. He didn't bother to bring his helmet with him this time. Garrus wasn't sure if that meant he was getting sloppy or if that was a show of good faith.

"Have a seat. I don't have your name yet.", Shepard said.

Garrus sat down and remained tight lipped.

"Look, I get that you don't trust us. We don't really trust you yet. However, you haven't given us any reason to believe you or your people are a threat. We don't like to fight other races unless we have to. We want to make peaceful first contact and return you to your people.", Shepard said.

Garrus wasn't sure if he was telling the truth. If so, great. That means they aren't scouts for an invasion force. If they are an invasion force, this could be a trap. Then again, if this were a trap or a ploy, why haven't the aliens asked him for anything?

Shepard saw that the alien was thinking. At least it was listening to him.

"We're going to the Citadel. From there, we hope to make first contact. We aren't hostile. We hope you can help prove that.", said Shepard.

Garrus saw it.

So that's what he wants me to do.

"How do I know you aren't going to kill us all if I do?", Garrus asked.

Shepard stared right at him and gave a sly smile, the exact same kind Garrus liked to give.

"Because you're good. You saw through my plan to capture you, and that was impressive. Most soldiers wouldn't have bothered to think like you did. You're good. If you say your people are strong, I believe you. If you say you want peace, I believe that too. ", Shepard said. He was telling the truth.

Garrus was paying more attention now. He wasn't sure what to think anymore. On one hand, the only hostile thing his captors had done was imprison him. Now they even let him out. There wasn't a reason to think they were going to harm anyone. He didn't know the whole story, and with Saren on the loose they couldn't afford to make more enemies. He had to take a leap of faith.

"My name is Garrus. Garrus Vakarian. I'll put in a good word for you guys. Besides, you weren't too shabby yourself, Shepard.", Garrus said with a wry smile.

"Alright then. Let's get out of the brig. I always hated it in here.", Shepard said while surveying the dull gray walls.

Garrus was intrigued by that. It sounded like there was some history behind it.

"You got thrown in the brig?", asked Garrus as he and Shepard walked out the door.

"That's what happens when you punch your drill sergeant in the face.", said Shepard, remembering boot camp. He hated that place. Then again, every soldier hates boot camp.

That invoked a brief laugh from the Turian.

Shepard liked this "Garrus". He was smart, skilled, and trained. He was like an alien Shepard.

After a few minute's walk, Shepard and Garrus made it to the CIC.

Shepard stepped forward with his hands behind his back.

"Assemble, team. Stand at attention.", ordered Shepard. His face held a stern expression.

The team assembled, including Joker.

"Our guest has agreed to put in a good word for us once we reach the Citadel. From what he's told me, that should be enough to prevent an armed conflict. Once we smooth things over with them, things should get along just fine.", Shepard said.

Miranda noticed Shepard had given the alien back it's eyepiece. She didn't like that. He might be able to contact someone. He could be

double crossing them. She couldn't say that yet, or else it might cause more suspicion by the alien. Unfortunately, trusting Shepard was the only option she had at the moment.

The others weren't too happy about it either, but they knew Shepard knew what he was doing. He hadn't let them down yet.

"Okay, when we get to the Citadel we're going to try to make first contact. I've determined that the aliens are not a threat, and if their weapons are anything to go by they could be helpful. Look sharp everyone, and try not to scare anyone when we arrive. Understood?", Shepard said.

"Yes sir.", was the team's response.

EDI's spherical avatar once again appeared in the CIC.

"Shepard, we have located the Citadel. Your orders?", she said.

Shepard thought for a moment. Their presence might alert some kind of security. Best to sneak in and then make contact.

"I want us fully cloaked, then take us to the Citadel.", ordered Shepard.

Joker turned around in his chair to face the Commander.

"Aye, Commander.", he said.

The Normandy dropped out of slipspace around a mass relay and began inputting the ship's mass into the huge alien object. The Normandy raised it's cloak.

The rest of the crew was checking their weapons and armor, preparing for anything if worse should come to worse.

Shepard stared out the window in front of Joker. Garrus's word was the only thing standing between the Normandy and armed conflict. He didn't want to be enemies with these people, they have resources the Alliance could use. If there were another way to do this, he would. So far, another way hasn't been found. Could he really trust this alien?

I suppose we're about to find out.

* * *

><p> Thanks everyone for the support. As long as I'm making at least a few people happy, I'm happy.

That being said, I think now would be a good time to talk about a few things brought up.

**The first being stretching this over two galaxies. I understand that it's sketchy, but no sketchier than a slipspace malfunction behaving in ways it's not supposed to in canon or a random wormhole transporting one set of characters to another reality. It's simply a crossover mechanism. Every crossover has one, and when it comes to Mass Effect/Halo crossovers there is no possible way to make one

without breaching canon. We do it anyway because we like the potential stories that bringing the two universes together provide.**

** I cannot see how my method of crossover is implausible. The Reapers clearly can make relays reaching into darkspace, so it isn't that much of a stretch to assume they could have created extragalactic relays. The why is something you'll have to stick around for. **

Furthermore, it has been heavily hinted that there could be other extragalactic civilizations within Halo canon, as it is hinted that the Flood is of extragalactic origin. (Do not take that as a hint that the Precursors had something to do with all this in my fic. They don't.)

So thanks everyone!

8. The Council

Disclaimer: I do not own Mass Effect or Halo

* * *

><p>The mass relay managed to get them to the Citadel in less than a second. It still amazed everyone that such a device existed. The cloak was up, the team was armed and ready for trouble, and EDI's cyber defences were raised. If the alien didn't keep his word, they would destroy all evidence of earth and their technology, then go down fighting. They were prepared for whatever was going to happen. Should the aliens be hostile, they would make them pay before going down. The determination was palpable among the team. They were SPARTANs. They were going to die fighting. It might as well be here.<p>

Somehow the ominous atmosphere in the ship didn't detract from the amazing scenery that surrounded them. Everywhere they looked, magnificent purple clouds covered the area, possibly the remains of a star. Shepard had seen many stars and nebulas, but nothing quite compared to this. It was as if someone took great care to wrap a small area of warmth and light to protect it from the cold, dark void of outer space. To be a random coincidence seemed impossible. Perhaps they created it? If so, their technology may rival the Forerunners.

They finally arrived at the Citadel, which was also an amazing sight. Despite it's simplistic design-for it clearly consisted of four large arms and a ring like structure on the bottom and nothing more-it had a mysterious draw to it. The metal it was constructed of was of a similar purple as the surrounding nebula. That was interesting. Perhaps it was by design?

It was also disconcerting. Covenant technology was also built with some sort of purple colored metal. Everyone with high enough clearance knows what technology the Covenant reverse engineered to use. They used Forerunner artifacts. Could there be a connection between this space station and the Forerunners?

If so, Shepard had to wonder what that ring shaped structure at the

base of the space station was for. Knowing the Forerunners, there could be much more to this station than these aliens realize. They could have built their civilization on a Halo and not even realized it, completely oblivious to the fact they were standing on a galaxy-destroying superweapon. This warrants an investigation. The question is whether to warn them of this possibility. No, best not. Not until his suspicions are concrete.

It would take a little while to scout the area, so Shepard decided to take a small break. He took a seat. He took this time to think, to further plan. He had many plans. Every good tactician develops plans, and then knows how to adapt when they go wrong.

It then occurred to him that for all his contingencies, he had still erred. They were all based around first contact going wrong. What happened if things go right? He had not thought of that. Things had gone wrong so often that he had come to expect them to do so now. How could he possibly plan for things going correctly? He was not a diplomat. What would he tell them?

It did not comfort the Commander. It was not fear he felt but annoyance. Irritation, of a sort. Shepard was good at adapting on the fly, but he preferred not having to if he didn't want to do so. For all Hackett's wisdom, Shepard wondered why he didn't see this one coming.

Maybe he has more faith in me than I know.

Only time would tell whether things would go wrong or right. Until then, all he could do was wait.

Ashley, Kaidan, and Vega were all staring out the observation deck's large plasma window. The structure they were orbiting in secret was the Citadel, so they had been told by their alien guest. They weren't sure whether to trust him or not. While there was a city on the station, it was surrounded by several military ships. Most of them were large, but not nearly as large as the ships they were used to seeing. They circled the Citadel like sharks in water, except their purpose was to protect rather than destroy.

"You would figure they would deploy bigger ships to guard a place of such importance.", said Ashley.

"I mean, the largest one is still smaller than many of our ships.", she continued.

The others thought the same, but hadn't bothered to say so till now.

"Yeah. Are we sure that EDI is right? The alien might be jerking us around, trying to stall us till larger ships arrive.", Vega said.

It was a little suspicious. This might not be the citadel, for all they know it could be a simple military base. As soon as they uncloak they could get in a fire fight. They didn't know whether to trust Garrus. However, the Commander thought it was a good idea and he is no pushover. They had heard stories about what ONI operatives do to those who commit insubordination. It didn't sound pretty.

So, they would follow the Commander anyway. Even if they didn't trust

Garrus, they certainly trusted Shepard, even if it meant a fight.

That was fine by them, of course. Everyone was already suited up and had their weapons. If any hostile forces wanted to board this ship, they would have to deal with these three SPARTANs. That would be no easy feat. Between Kaidan's biotics, Ashley's swiftness, and Vega's big gun, they could kill a whole squad before their bodies hit the floor.

EDI's avatar appeared in the room, obviously to answer Vega's challenge. She no doubt heard them. For all intents and purposes, she was the ship. As such, she was omnipresent aboard the Normandy. It made the crew feel like they were being watched at first, but they got used to it. After all, EDI was the best and most famous AI next to the long lost Cortana. It's usually good to have her on your side.

"I am right, Vega. I know it's hard, but you should probably trust the AI with the ability to vent the ship in the middle of open space.", EDI said.

She loved pulling that card, even though it wouldn't matter much since MJOLNIR VII are airtight and can withstand a vacuum for a large amount of time if necessary.

"I guess we'll find out who is right in a minute or two.", said Vega. His voice reflected his boredom. Vega craved danger. The thrill of winning against impossible odds was what he lived for, if not just to make him feel better about Feh1 Prime.

This could be such a battle. He was ready, just like the others.

* * *

><p>Garrus sat alone in the mess, the only really empty place on the ship he could go without the aliens wondering if he was sabotaging their ship. He could have gone up and watched the entry to the Citadel with the others, but what for them was an interesting new experience was a mundane task he'd seen over and over again. The magic disappears when you work on the Citadel for a while. Eventually it's just a big purple cloud.<p>

It was a blessing in disguise, however. The other aliens clearly didn't want to be around him. At least he got out of his cell, which was some progress. He was still kicking himself for falling for such a simple interrogation tactic. Between not eating anything they gave him for days due to fears it wasn't levo-amino acid food and not sleeping for fear of being vulnerable, he let his judgement slip. They barely had to do anything, Garrus had done most of the work himself.

Things might have been different if he had been more wise. He was too busy being defiant to think about actually resisting interrogation. As a result, his ego lead to him being humiliated by a simple goading.

Hopefully I won't have to tell anyone about it.

Now, he had taken up the task of learning all he could about this

alien race. This was difficult, because they would allow him only partial access to the ship. Strangely, no one stayed to keep an eye on him. They clearly didn't trust him, so it makes no sense for them to simply let him wander around freely, expecting him to obey their command.

Despite that, he couldn't shake this bizarre feeling he was being watched. Maybe it was just being on an alien ship.

He also noticed the lack of a VI on the ship. Usually all ships have one to help handle small things, but this ship seemed devoid of anything but the standard computer. Perhaps computer knowledge was not their strong subject.

Another difficult thing was that no one was willing to tell him anything. They kept their lips sealed. Very disciplined. They also wore powerful armored exoskeletons. Coupled with the guns, they were probably a military unit. That spoke quite a bit about this race.

They were at least slightly xenophobic, and from what he'd seen they were probably a warrior race if they sent military units with no civilian personnel on exploration missions. They weren't disorganized like the Krogan. No, they were almost like Turians.

But why would such a race explore at all? The logical answer would be to look for new lands to conquer.

Garrus felt a little uneasy telling the Council they were okay, but on the other hand he really didn't have a choice. With Saren threatening the galaxy, he could not advise going to war. Resources were spread thin enough. If this race was actually friendly and they get angry, not only did they gain a new enemy but they lost a potential ally against Saren.

On another day, Garrus would most likely order the ship destroyed. But he couldn't today. Today, he couldn't afford to create another enemy for the Citadel. He had to let them in, and accept the consequences of that action.

A voice came through the intercom.

"Garrus, we need you up here. It's time."

It was Shepard.

Garrus sighed. No turning back now. Now he had to choose. Would he betray them? Or save them?

Garrus got up and began walking towards the elevator.

It was time to face the music.

* * *

><p>When Garrus arrived on the CIC, the rest of the crew was waiting there. They were all staring at him, their eyes each telling a different story. Garrus could see it. The eyes always betrayed your thoughts. It was one of the few universal traits among species. He learned that back in his cop days on the Citadel.<p>

Ashley's eyes were suspicious. She didn't believe Garrus would help them.

Vega's eyes were challenging, daring Garrus to turn on them. He was ready to fight.

Kaidan was unsure. He didn't want to fight anyone, but was ready if it came to that.

Miranda clearly didn't trust him. She thought this whole thing was a bad idea.

Shepard's eyes, though, were different. They gave a look he hadn't seen in a long time. It wasn't suspicion, challenge, or unsureness.

They showed faith. He believed in Garrus, despite only talking to him for a few minutes. It was a look a mentor gave to his student. It was a look that redefined what Garrus was about to do.

His choice was no longer a simple "kill them or save them". It was more. It was "Destroy an opportunity or investigate more". He was intrigued. He was either going to open or close a door, and once he did there was no going back.

Garrus stepped forward into the center of the group, Shepard on his right and his subordinates on his left.

One group suspicious, the other faithful.

"Okay, Garrus. We've set up a camera here. We're about to make contact with the Citadel. We'll broadcast you on all frequencies so someone will hear us.", said Shepard. He pointed to a circular platform, perfect for holographic communications.

Garrus was still unsure. But now, it was time. He could no longer turn back.

He stepped in front of the camera.

"Just say what you need to say.", Shepard said.

Encouragement. Why wouldn't they just tell him to save them? Why give a choice? Garrus was confused.

"Alright, we're live.", Joker said.

The Normandy uncloaked right in front of the Citadel, for all to see. Shields were up, but weapons weren't charged. That was as nonthreatening as Shepard was willing to go. Hopefully it was enough.

* * *

><p>General Septimus was growing tired of this job. He had been with the Turian military for a long time. He even fought in the Krogan Rebellions. However, he was growing too old for it all. It was time to step down, let a younger man take charge. He was just an old man in a new world. It was time to retire. In a week, that dream would be

made a reality. For the last few years, he had been given a quieter command.<p>

His assignment to the Citadel Fleet was both an honor and a prelude to his inevitable retirement. It was usually quiet around the Citadel, since no one in their right mind would attack the most fortified point in the galaxy. Any action that took place usually revolved around smuggling, and C-SEC Patrol typically handled those.

That is what made it quiet. That was something he liked. No one was going to shoot at the largest fleet in the galaxy. He could rest.

Septimus leaned back in his chair and relaxed, enjoying his last week in command. Maybe after he would visit Sha'ira after he retired...

"Sir, I think you need to see this.", said an ensign, disrupting Septimus's moment of peace.

Irritated yet understanding, Septimus came over to take a look at the ensign's discovery.

"What have you found, ensign?", he said.

The ensign was new, he may have misinterpreted the sensors or some other instrument. Septimus understood that new recruits made mistakes, and so it was important to give them the attention they needed. After all, it's important to learn from your mistakes. This was a quality expected of every Turian.

"Sir, a ship just came out of nowhere. It matches the description of the ship that kidnapped the Spectre.", the ensign said.

Septimus's face grew solemn. He called another ensign over to evaluate the recruit's data.

"It's true sir. It's here.", the other ensign said. It confirmed their worst fears.

The Hierarchy had listed a general alert to it's forces. Assume the ship is hostile.

So Septimus did.

* * *

><p>"Sir, they're powering up their weapons!", Joker shouted into the CIC.<p>

Time slowed down for Garrus as his mind raced. Whatever he says here will either start a war, or give his people a fighting chance against a coming one from a new enemy.

What if these aliens were planning to enslave everyone? Would believing that they aren't be naive? Was he opening the front door for an invasion force? Or was he gaining a new ally that could stop Saren?

On one side of him stood four people. Their eyes betrayed their suspicion. They were like everyone he had ever met. Their opinion was the same. Garrus was trouble. His C-SEC boss thought the same. So did the mob on Omega. So did the Council. Even the Hierachy thought Garrus was a problem. He couldn't count on them. They betrayed him, just like Sidonis had betrayed him. Only he couldn't kill the Council in revenge.

On his left stood people who held opinions of Garrus that everyone else had held Garrus's entire life.

Not so on his right. On his right stood Commander Shepard, the mysterious figure that managed to trick him with a simple goading, yet still believed in him after Garrus's show of weakness. He was different. No one had faith in Garrus, except this mysterious figure who had only spoken to him twice. Why?

Now, Garrus decided what was going to happen. His next words would either save or kill them. They would either open or close a door, and it would never again be shut.

The stress built up inside him. He made his choice.

"This is Garrus Vakarian. Stand down everyone, these guys aren't hostile. Stand down.", Garrus said.

The tension in the ship shattered like glass. It could be felt everywhere, even with the Turians.

Septimus came over the line to talk to Garrus, his holographic image projected by the ship.

"We're glad to see you're alright, Garrus.", Septimus said. He took a look at the other occupants on the ship, all armored beings. Miranda was not visible.

"You sure they aren't hostile?", he said half-joking.

"Yeah, they're good. Where do we dock?", asked Garrus.

Shepard shook his head.

"No. The ship will not dock. We will travel to the station by Pelican. The ship will remain in orbit at all times.", asserted Shepard.

Septimus cautiously nodded his head.

"Very well. We will accept your 'Pelican' at docking bay twenty two.", Septimus said. The channel then closed.

Garrus half expected a barrage of bullets as his reward for helping them, but that didn't happen. He was right about them.

The whole crew breathed a sigh of relief. Now they could rest easy for a little while, at least whatever "easy" passes for when you're a SPARTAN. Now the question is what to say to these new aliens. Shepard would have to address that.

Garrus exited the room, probably to splash cold water on his face to

get over that stressful experience.

Shepard seized this opportunity to address his team.

"Listen up everyone.", Shepard said.

The team turned to face the Commander. Their next orders would probably be the most important they would receive in a long time. Even EDI was listening, though she was hiding to prevent Garrus from guessing Human computer technology levels.

"We've made it this far. We're about to enter alien territory, so right now we need to take a moment to plan. I have no doubt Garrus was telling the truth about his people. However, we should expect the unexpected. Here's the plan. Vega and Miranda will remain on the ship with Joker to secure the ship. Kaidan, you and Ashley are with me. EDI, fragment up so you can come with me and manage the ship. Wear your helmets unless I order you to take them off. Side arms only, I don't want to start a fight.", Shepard said.

The others nodded in agreement, except Miranda who was not pleased. As an ONI agent, she was expecting to be part of the ground team. The Illusive Man would want her to be there on the station, learning about this new civilization. This command was unacceptable.

Shepard and the others had just completed the task of putting their helmets on and running a diagnostic when Miranda decided to step in.

"I don't think it's a good idea for me to stay on board. I should go with you.", she said.

Shepard, who had his back to her, turned to face her. He knew why she wanted to go. She wanted to gather information on the aliens for the Illusive Man. Not on his watch. Shepard didn't want to reveal anything to anyone until he had a better understanding of the situation.

"No, I need you here. If something happens to me you're the best equipped to takeover the situation. You also know the protocol for destroying information.", Shepard cleverly responded.

Miranda still wasn't happy with the response.

"I have to go down there. The Illusive Man expects updates, Shepard.", Miranda said.

Shepard looked at her and gave her the famous stare, that stare only a SPARTAN could give. You couldn't see Shepard's eyes for his visor, but you could feel them pierce into your soul.

Shepard slowly walked a little closer to her and stopped when he was uncomfortably close.

"The Illusive Man isn't here. This is my ship. My command. You don't make the call who I send down. I do. Now, you can either do as I say or I will replace you.", Shepard said in a low, threatening voice.

Miranda begrudgingly backed off. She wasn't sure how he could replace

her, but anything can happen with Shepard.

"Now, if there aren't any other complications to the mission, it's time to get started. Ashley, call Garrus and tell him we're ready to leave.", Shepard said.

They then went down to the hangar and took a seat in the Pelican, which no longer needed a pilot due to advancements in AI.

The hangar doors opened and the Pelican ferried it's living cargo off to the unknowns of the Citadel.

* * *

><p>Citadel Presidium

Liara hurried her way through the Presidium, eager to be part of the next events. Normally she would have hated to be pulled away from her studies on the ancient Protheans, but now she had a chance to be part of history. The Council was about to make the first significant first contact since the meeting of the Turians.

Contrary to popular belief, first contact happened quite frequently. The events usually go unnoticed due to the fact that most first contact was between the Citadel and pre-spacefaring species, so the most that happened was the Citadel offering protection for the fledgling race.

This, however, was completely different. It was clear from the brief encounters that they had with the new species that this race was not new to space travel and was indeed an advanced spacefaring race, perhaps beyond that of the Citadel races judging by their unique form of FTL. This first contact could change the galaxy forever.

Imagine all that could be learned from these beings. Perhaps they would teach them this new form of FTL.

She also wondered what they looked like. General Septimus was the only person to actually see one. All he could tell was that they were bipedal with two arms and one head, like most sapient species. Maybe they were just explorers who got lost.

There was so much to learn. She was glad she had been given the honor to be the Council's Prothean expert on the First Contact team. The Council thought it would be prudent to include such an expert in case their visitors wondered about their history. It was one of the highest honors that could be given.

The Council had thankfully been kind enough to look past her mother's betrayal, at least. It never felt good to be the daughter of a monster. She still had trouble believing her mother was working with Saren. They hadn't spoken in a long time, but the impact could still be felt.

Not only was she glad she was here because it gave her an exciting opportunity, she was also glad that she had been pulled away from the Prothean dig site. Most times she would love to be looking for old Prothean artifacts, but now that the notorious Saren was hunting down Prothean dig sites across the galaxy she was glad to be gone.

She would soon be at the station where a Council shuttle would take her to the docking bay. She would soon meet the mysterious new species up close. Her excitement could barely be contained.

She finally reached her destination where a Turian bodyguard opened the shuttle door for her. She stepped inside and sat on the amazingly comfortable seats.

It was like all her dreams had come true.

Time to meet these new people.

* * *

><p>Unknown **Lab**_

Mordin Solus carefully focused on the cell he had in his microscope. He had looked at many small organisms in his brief lifetime. It was a favorite hobby of his. He enjoyed examining all the small details of the creatures, carefully documenting each one. It was a peaceful exercise in a sea of danger and struggles.

He had long been a member of the Salarian STG, performing more than a few unethical experiments himself. It still bothered him that he did what he did to the Krogan. It was necessary, but he hated it nonetheless.

It disappointed him that the Krogan were ruined. Everyone tossed the blame onto the aggressive creatures, but ultimately the blame was on the Salarians. It was they who chose to uplift the creatures. They had brought them up as super soldiers to combat an enemy they could not, and then threw them away instead of mentoring them into a productive member of galactic society.

Mordin had a brief lifespan. All Salarians do. His memory, however, was long. It always troubled him that the Council had developed a habit of shifting blame onto other species for their failures.

Two major events came to mind.

They did not honor their oath to assist the Quarians when they faced a time of trouble. Instead, they chose to stand by and watch their homeworld be taken over by machines. Machines that are now conquering the galaxy no less. They could have stopped the problem when it was small, but instead they let it run rampant and hoped it would never come back to haunt them.

The second event was the Krogan Rebellions. Perhaps it was necessary to uplift the Krogan to defeat the Rachni. However, they just let the Krogan go afterward. They should have been mentored and trained, and perhaps they wouldn't be as aggressive as they are today.

He especially blamed the Asari for them. Their lifespan was very long, and with all their experience they should have seen these problems coming.

No matter. The damage was done.

He needed to stop thinking like this. Everywhere he went the same thoughts haunted him. Curing the plague on Omega didn't ease his mind

either. Where could he find rest from his racing thoughts? Omega had not solved it. Neither had Sur'Kesh, his homeworld. Now it was clear the Citadel wasn't going to work either.

Where could he find rest?

Mordin's communication device beeped. Mordin answered.

"Yes? What is it? Hmm. Interesting. I'm coming.", Mordin said rapidly.

The Council was asking him to be on a First Contact team and he was to report to Docking Bay 22 as soon as possible.

First contact interesting phenomenon. Wonder what race. Hostile? No, would not let them on Citadel. Must be friendly. New friendly race is always welcome. Will come. Someone else might do it wrong.*Mental sharp inhale* Must leave now.

Dr. Mordin Solus dropped what he was doing and went for the door. He knew his destination.

* * *

><p>Shepard and his crew sat quietly inside the Pelican Mk. V. The Mk. V was specifically designed for N7 missions, being more expensive but suited for the job. It was armed with state of the art plasma machine guns and missiles. In addition to that it was slightly larger, able to carry more equipment inside it. This made it possible to move heavy firepower quickly. It also had a cloak, like most stealth vessels. For all it's fancy features, it always seemed cold inside, at least it would be if you weren't wearing MJOLNIR armor.<p>

"Shepard, I've begun looking through their data networks. They don't seem to use AI, so it was easy to break into most of their networks.", EDI said talking to Shepard. He could see her avatar in the top left corner of his visor.

_Why would they not use AIs? _

"What else can you tell me about these people?", asked Shepard.

"We drastically overestimated how powerful their armed forces are. Our space forces are superior in nearly everyway. Their shields cannot withstand energy attacks. The pulse lasers on the Normandy could probably put down a good portion of their ships. As a culture, they seem to be afraid of everything. There haven't been many advances in genetics or cybernetics for fear of causing problems they couldn't control.", EDI said.

That took plenty of stress off Shepard. Missions are always easier when you have the biggest and best weapons.

"Hmm. This is interesting. They're currently at war with someone named Saren, and losing too. He's attacking the galaxy with some kind of robot army.", EDI said.

An opportunity arose in Shepard's head. It was risky, but the reward could put a firm foothold for humanity in this galaxy. If the space

forces of this galaxy were as weak as EDI claims, then it's possible he could use his authority as expedition leader to put down this "Saren" quickly and thus force the leaders of this galaxy into granting humanity a favor.

And then another favor. And another favor. The idea had promise. That reminded Shepard about an ever increasing trait among his species. Give humanity an inch, they'll take a mile. It was the only way to make sure humanity was dominant, and thus ensured survival. The potential was endless for this galaxy. Hidden manufacturing bases, top secret weapons development facilities, all hidden from the Sangheili.

"Okay then. We should be arriving soon. As soon as we get there, I want you to accumulate as much info as possible. I won't do much talking, save that for the real diplomats. Instead, I'll give them an offer they can't refuse. I need to contact Hackett and Anderson ASAP to develop my plan further. Get me a comms line, EDI.", Shepard ordered.

"On it, Shepard.", EDI answered in her military voice.

The Pelican soon arrived at it's destination, prepared to let it's cargo out.

* * *

><p>The first contact team waited at Docking bay 22, prepared to welcome the new alien creatures. The team consisted of two turian guards, Telia a diplomat, Mordin the omnidisciplinary scientist, and Liara the Prothean expert. Emotions were running high among the team. Assuming the ship isn't simply lost, advanced civilizations didn't usually make contact with the Council. They had to be advanced for such technology like the cloak they used and their strange FTL. Even if they weren't highly advanced, their tech was interesting to say the least. This could change the galaxy and they knew it.<p>

Everyone was eager to meet them, except maybe the Turians, but it was their job to be suspicious. They would have sent more guards, but they didn't want to appear hostile and the Council wanted to keep this secret until further notice. Besides, hundreds of reinforcements from C-SEC were just a call away. There was no need to cause alarm.

The rest of the team maintained their composure, attempting to act civilized. Liara had difficulty with this. She studied alien civilizations for a living. The possibility of meeting an alien race like this made her excited. What would they look like? Would they look peaceful, or were they a warrior species? Did they have intimidating features? What is their civilization like? Liara just couldn't wait to ask them.

She didn't have to wait long. A mysterious spacecraft descended from the larger ship it came from and backed into the docking bay. At first it seemed like there was no airlock, but then the back of the ship opened up.

The Turians raised their rifles, ready for anything. The first person to step out of the vehicle was Garrus Vakarian, the Spectre who had

been kidnapped. He appeared to be unharmed, and he was wearing his famous eyepiece and a wry smile to match.

They didn't harm him. They must be friendly. I bet they're the most benign looking creatures...Woah.

After Garrus, three tall, imposing figures in full armor stepped out. They were easily a little taller than anyone else there, and probably stronger. Their armor was unlike anything they had seen. It was like seeing a Krogan in full armor, except more utilitarian and of a more humanoid shape.

They all wore helmets that covered their faces.

The Turians raised their rifles in readiness when the ominous looking figure in the middle of the aliens spoke.

"If you value your life, you'll put those rifles away.",he said.

The Turians didn't want to risk anything, so they put the guns away. Telia first thought that raising a gun at them was foolish, but hearing the aliens talk changed her emotion from anger to slight fear. Liara felt the same, reevaluating her intial opinion of the aliens. The alien sounded almost like an Asari, but had a deeper voice. It was strange and off somehow, like it was in the uncanny valley of voices.

Telia regained her composure and attempted to recover.

"Welcome to the Citadel! We're sorry about the guns, they're paid to be suspicious. We're the First Contact team. We are here to show you the Citadel and answer what questions you might have.", Telia said in the friendliest way she could.

Shepard contemplated how he wanted to come accross to these aliens. He already knew pretty much everything about them thanks to EDI, so he didn't really have many question to ask. However, it could be a good idea to feign ignorance until a later time.

"Good. We should be on with it then. Take us to your shuttle.", Shepard said. The First Contact team led the aliens to a shuttle, a little nervous the tall aliens were behind them.

The spacious shuttle was lined with comfortable leather seats, and advantage the SPARTANS did not use due to their armor. The shuttle was designed to be a little larger inside so everyone could fit.

"Shepard, I managed to get your request to the Admirals. They say you are authorized to do what is necessary to succeed in that goal. They are sending five frigates to reinforce you. They regret that they cannot send larger ships, but the treaty with the Sangheili prevents them from doing so. You can give them the offer.", EDI said.

"Good job EDI. Keep digging up info on this galaxy.", Shepard said with his speakers off.

They flew to the Presidium, next to a government building. The occupants stepped out of the shuttle and went into the building. Telia led everyone into an elevator and in a few moments they arrived

on another floor with a conference room.

Everyone stepped inside and pulled up a seat, ready to discuss things with the aliens.

"This is just a preliminary meeting. The Council will want to meet with you soon, but until then we would like to talk and hopefully get to know each other better. My name is Telia, and this is Liara. We are from a race called the Asari. This is Mordin Solus, a Salarian. The guards and Garrus Vakarian are Turians. Our species make up the Council races.", Telia said.

Shepard didn't immediately answer, choosing to raise suspense. He read a quick overview of the Council, and the first thing that came to mind was that they were a more benign version of the Covenant without a theocratic government. The second thought was that they didn't realize a good idea if it smacked them in the face.

"Helmets off everyone.", Shepard ordered over helmet to helmet comms. The Asari would probably be shocked that they looked so similar. Shock was good.

The SPARTANs all removed their helmets and placed them on the table, revealing the human behind the metal shell.

Everyone was shocked that the aliens looked so similar to the Asari. As far as body shape and facial structure goes, they looked nearly identical, especially the female alien. The others looked like males of the alien species.

"We're not diplomats, so I am not authorized to discuss much with you. My name and rank is Commander Jack Shepard. To my left is Kaidan Alenko and to my right is Ashley Williams. We are soldiers of the Systems Alliance. Our race is called Human.", Shepard said. He acted dismissively, almost condescendingly.

Despite not being diplomats, Telia wished to continue. Surely more could be learned.

"Welcome to the Citadel, Humans. We would like to know where you came from. Perhaps we could one day visit.", Telia said. The others were listening and taking notes.

Shepard thought about that one. Best not to tell them specifically where, or how they got here. However, a vague description couldn't hurt.

"I doubt it. We are extragalactic. Your FTL drives are not advanced enough to cross darkspace.", Shepard said in an attempt to make humanity look stronger. Mordin seemed to take note of that, he seemed interested in human FTL, or perhaps technology in general.

The other alien reactions ranged from disbelief to amazement. A race from another galaxy? That was something new. Most of their galaxy had not yet been explored. A race with the technology to travel across the seemingly impassible void of darkspace into other galaxies was advanced indeed.

It was Shepard's turn now. First Contact protocol dictates that when in contact with a friendly alien race, they must be informed of the

existence of the Halo rings and the Flood. There may not be either in this galaxy, but better safe than sorry. After all, there was some evidence that the Flood were extragalactic. If they could threaten the Milky Way, they could threaten this galaxy as well. If the Flood got a foothold in one galaxy, then every galaxy was at risk.

Shepard tossed a holographic projector pad accross the table, and a holographic video of a marine being turned into a hideous monster by the Flood played. The first contact team was shocked, but the humans had seen it all too many times.

"What is that?", asked Telia, still a little frightened.

"It's called the Flood. It's a parasitic lifeform that infects other species. We think we beat the last of them, but protocol says we show you just in case they're still out there. You should also watch out for these, if by some off chance your galaxy has them.", Shepard said. He then pulled up a picture of the Halo Rings.

"These are called Halo rings. They're superweapons that can wipe out a galaxy. They also have specimens of the Flood on them. I doubt they are in this galaxy, but it's best to inform you just in case.", Shepard said.

It was clear to the First Contact team that there was far more to this race than they were being told. If such things existed in their galaxy, no wonder they walk around in armored suits.

"Would you please tell us about your FTL?", Telia asked.

Shepard knew that one was coming. These aliens traveled in real space, a feat considered impossible until the discovery of element zero. They didn't know about slipspace, and he was inclined to keep it that way as long as possible.

"No. That is a secret I can't reveal without authorization.", Shepard said stoically.

The SPARTANs just sat there, like machines. No real expressions on their faces, every inquiry deflected. It was enough to raise doubt as to whether these humans were really living, or perhaps they were like the Elcor and couldn't express themselves.

Telia was growing frustrated but wouldn't let it show. This was to be expected in a first contact situation. All the protocol in the world can't prepare for first contact. Talking to an unknown race for the first time can be difficult. There are often biological differences, social differences, strange customs, and philosophical differences between races that make it difficult to communicate. She was trained for this, however. Patience was the biggest part of her job.

"Are there any questions you would like to ask us?", Telia said. If she couldn't ask them anything, maybe they would ask her something. That would still be contact.

Shepard decided to gratify them. He had been silent so far, might as well shake things up. EDI had already revealed quite a bit about their galaxy, so he didn't really have many questions he could ask. Still, he had to say something. Now to decide what to ask. You can understand a great deal about someone by knowing the questions they

ask. If he asked about their military, he could be seen as an aggressive warmonger. If he asks about their technology, they may think he is some kind of pirate after their technology. No, he needed to ask a question that would throw off suspicion and break the ice all at once.

"This galaxy must have an interesting history. Care to share?", asked Shepard as friendly as a SPARTAN can. No harm could come from that question.

Telia motioned for Liara to answer, and Liara did so nervously. There was a reason she stayed away from the lecture hall. Long stints at an archeological dig didn't provide much time for development of social skills. Still, she was the expert.

"Is there any particular part you would like to know about?", asked Liara.

Shepard paused. What would be the natural question to ask in this situation? Something about the mass relays.

"What do you know about these Mass Relays?", Shepard asked.

Liara answered the best she could.

"Evidence suggests that the Protheans, a race that existed in this galaxy before us, built the Mass Relays as a method of fast travel. All their technology was based around element zero, which allows the mass effect. The Protheans also built the Citadel, which was the center of galactic society. Then, they mysteriously vanished. We found their technology and their legacy and took it as our own, making the Citadel the heart of galactic government. The technology they left behind makes our understanding of the mass effect possible, providing the only known way of interstellar travel. At least, until you arrived.", Liara said. For someone who hasn't lectured in a while, she still had talent.

Shepard nodded. He had read a little about the Protheans while in the Pelican, and noticed how similar their story was to the Forerunners. It would be interesting if there was a Forerunner presence in this galaxy, though it's doubtful. The architecture used in constructing these relics are different than that found in the milky way, although when the Forerunners are involved anything can happen. If the Forerunners were here, they may have been experimenting with a better form of FTL. After all, being able to travel in real space would allow Slipspace to be free to move larger objects and more digital traffic without clogging up slipspace, which can be a considerable problem since it slows down slipspace.

If the Citadel was the only Forerunner artifact in this galaxy, then it was probably just an outpost. That is, assuming Protheans and Forerunners are the same. He would have to mention that to Admiral Hackett, since scientists would probably be interested in investigating that possibility. It wasn't his job to do such things anyway.

"That's very interesting. We've been authorized to provide you with our history as soon as we meet with the Council.", Shepard said. Which he hoped was soon. They were probably debriefing Garrus about his stay on the Normandy.

Shortly after he said that a Turian aid came into the room, almost like a nurse at a Doctor's office.

"The Council is ready to meet with you now.", he said.

The SPARTANs donned their helmets and everyone in the room rose from their comfortable chairs and exited into the hallway, taking the same route they had used to come in to leave for the shuttle. They once again sat down in the official shuttle and flew to the Citadel Tower, where the seemingly all powerful Council awaited them.

* * *

><p>After climbing a seemingly endless staircase, the SPARTANs and the first contact team reached the Council chambers lobby. Beautiful pink flowering trees lined the lobby.<p>

"I bet those stairs aren't just for show. They would make a good defensive position.", Ashley said over helmet-to-helmet comms.

"Well of course they would, Ash. This place is called the Citadel, remember?", Kaidan said in return.

"Knock it off you two. When we get inside the chambers I want helmets off. Don't speak unless I order you to.", Shepard said.

"Yes sir.", the SPARTANs acknowledged.

They passed through the lobby and reached the Council Chambers. Garrus was there to meet them and the Councilors had already taken their positions on the grand balcony that they occupied during hearings. The balcony was raised above Shepard and the others' position, allowing the supreme judges of the galaxy to look down upon the mortals and observe their plight.

That was okay with Shepard. Everyone was entitled to their delusions, as long as they could bear the consequences of having them. Even humanity, for all it's humanistic pride, knew deep down that no one was special. In the grand scheme of things, they were one insignificant civilization in an endless sea of galaxies, just a raindrop falling into an ocean. Somewhere out there there is a force that could crush them all with ease. This was something humans understood that others did not. All that mattered was survival. Going off and exploring new worlds in the hopes of bettering mankind was an idealistic delusion.

It was clear to Shepard that this civilization did not understand how insignificant it was. They did not truly understand the meaning of the cosmic horrors that awaited them. Their experiences with the Rachni and the Krogan taught them to fear themselves, not the true threat. They should not fear themselves, they should fear the endless unknown that could show up on their doorstep any day. They should fear cosmic monstrosities like the Flood, and hostile alien races from beyond with technology and ways of thinking that are beyond their comprehension. They stood believing they were Gods, not knowing that somewhere out there were beings that would make them seem like the dust of the ground. This civilization was naive.

"Welcome to our galaxy, Shepard. We are pleased to meet you and your

race. It's unfortunate that we have not been able to talk much about your race, but when the official diplomats arrive I'm certain that will change. We still would like to make your acquaintance. Your people could be a great member of this galactic society if you would like, which I am willing be sure to go over with the official diplomats. Is there anything you have to say?", the Asari Councilor, Tevos, said.

Shepard stepped forward, starting to enact the first phase of the plan Hackett approved. After looking over tactical data EDI provided Shepard, Shepard asked Hackett about a plan to win over the races of this galaxy. Given the data, the UNSC deemed it feasible to defeat Saren with ten frigates and the support of this galaxy's forces. Using advanced weapons technology, the UNSC could wipe out the Geth fleet.

Once the humans won the war, the Council would be indebted to humanity, which the Systems Alliance would exploit. It seemed risky at first, but further examination revealed they had nothing to lose. It was only a few frigates, and if they lost they could simply retreat and act more covertly. This way was more preferable since it made more "friends" which could potentially be used against the Sangheili at a later date. The best part? It was an offer they couldn't refuse.

"Councilors, I have been authorized to discuss one thing with you.", Shepard said.

The Councilors, Tevos, Sparatus the Turian, and Velarn the Salarian listened closely. Anything the new species said was important.

"We are willing to defeat Saren for you.", Shepard said. He was ready for their reactions.

The Councilors were shocked, shocked enough that they actually expressed it. This was very unusual for the Councilors. However, they had a right to be. Saren was a threat they were not equipped to fight. The Geth had more advanced weapons, and they were no match for them. But humans, on the other hand, had the technology to defeat Saren. They could be the Citadel's last shot and defeating the menace.

Tevos and Velarn were sold, but Sparatus was suspicious. It was too good to be true. An alien race just shows up out of nowhere with the technology and the will to defeat the Citadel's greatest threat? Something was up.

"How do we know you can?", asked Sparatus.

Shepard sent a file containing the history of humanity, or at least most of it. It didn't contain anything deemed harmful to reveal.

"Read that. We can beat Saren.", Shepard said.

"What's the catch?", the Turian said. His suspicion could be heard in his voice.

Shepard thought something like this could happen.

"A favor.", Shepard said cryptically.

"What kind of favor?", asked Sparatus.

Shepard stared directly at Sparatus this time.

"That will be determined at a later date", Shepard said.

Sparatus leaned forward and glared at Shepard.

"And if we refuse?", he said.

Shepard hardened his face and made an intimidating stare, piercing into the Turian Councilor's soul.

"Then I'll just sit back and watch Saren raze your galaxy to the ground. After that, I'll come in and do whatever I want. This is me asking nicely. Don't make me do it the other way.", Shepard said in a harsher tone.

The Council was in a state of disbelief. Normally they would want to issue sanctions on such people, but they knew Shepard was right. If they didn't stop Saren soon, the galaxy would be destroyed. It was an offer they couldn't refuse. For the first time in the Councilors' histories, they were completely powerless. They finally met a force greater than themselves. They could not say no. They needed a friend, not an enemy.

"Very well, we accept your offer. We are eager to discuss more with your diplomats when they arrive. Our military forces will wish to speak to you later. If that is all, meeting adjourned.", Councilor Tevos said, eager to end the meeting.

The SPARTANs put on their helmets and left the chambers, marching out like the soldiers they were trained to be.

The first contact team was stunned. They saw the Council as unstoppable Gods of the Citadel. To see them on their knees was disillusioning. They left through the lobby like the SPARTANs.

The Council walked out of the room slowly, afraid and hopeful that whatever they just agreed to wasn't going to blow up in their faces. They finally met someone they had no control over, and for someone who is used to being in control, that is a very disturbing thought. Time would tell if they were right or wrong.

Garrus, on the other hand, smiled. It's not everyday that you get to see the Council beat. Maybe he would find this Shepard later. Not now though. Now he needed to rest.

Well done Shepard.

* * *

><p> Well, there you have it. I hope this version is better than the first. If you haven't seen it already, I'm trying to deconstruct a few ideas used in the Mass Effect and Halo universes. Feel free to tell me how I'm doing. Until next chapter everyone.

9. Preparations

****Disclaimer: I do not own Mass Effect or Halo.****

* * *

><p>Shepard paced, looking at the various resources he would have to work with. He had taken the Pelican back up to the Normandy with Kaidan and Ashley so he could work.<p>

The hours since the meeting had been dedicated to studying his enemy. That was an essential element to winning any conflict. If you do not know your enemy, you will lose.

Modern technology has proven useful when studying the enemy. EDI managed to pull as much about the Geth as possible and sent it to the dedicated AIs in the UNSC strategy department via slipspace. Since the Geth ships couldn't withstand energy weapons, the UNSC frigates would be able to easily destroy them, making for a quick victory. The AIs over at UNSC's strategy department were rarely wrong, and if they said Shepard could beat Saren with a few reinforcements, he believed he could.

The reward was great if he succeeded. There was much potential for this galaxy, the most obvious use would be hiding assets. They could build shipyards in this galaxy, and then create a surprise attack fleet that could storm through the Relay and defeat the Sangheili. The Sangheili foolishly wrote off exploration as a dangerous. That blunder will cost them. Seizing the Relay from them would be a simple task if it came to war. After that, it would only be a matter of time.

All he had to do was defeat a couple machines.

Shepard looked at the time on his helmet's HUD. It was nearly time for Hackett to call in. Shepard took his helmet off and placed it on his desk, then took the elevator down to the conference room.

Shortly after that, Hackett called to check in.

Shepard stepped into the scanning field as the table went down, ready to communicate holographically with Admiral Hackett.

The Admiral stepped forward, wearing his Alliance blues and his iconic hat.

"Congrats, Shepard. I'm glad everything has gone well so far. It's nice to meet aliens who aren't out to kill us for once.", Hackett said.

Shepard nodded. He was right, it had gone more smoothly than expected. Anything was better than a repeat of the Covenant. However, he doubted that was all Hackett had to say.

"The President and Defense Committee agree with your idea. There has been talk of using the galaxy to hide weapons development facilities and manufacturing plants. All we have to do is get control of the relay, which shouldn't be too difficult now that the Sangheili are

losing interest. All you have to do is beat these things, which shouldn't be too hard to do if they're as weak as you say.", Hackett said.

Shepard nodded.

"We have better weapons, better training, better equipment, and better ships. They don't stand a chance.", Shepard said.

Hackett looked down and sighed.

"I'm sure the Covenant said the same thing. Shepard, we don't have to do this. There are other ways. Don't let ambition get ahead of your better judgement. It's usually not a good idea to seek out war.", Hackett said.

Shepard looked back at Hackett, prepared to defend himself.

"I can win this. We have the best technology and the best soldiers in two galaxies. If we win, the government of this galaxy will owe us. We have a potential place to hide assets right under the Sangheili's nose. If we lose, we simply retreat behind the Relay and we're still good. There is no risk.", Shepard said with great resolve.

Hackett looked at Shepard.

"We can't really know for sure what we are facing. Seeking conflict is a bad idea. I recommended against it, but I can't overrule you as long as the Defense Committee agrees with you. I know that you can win. I also know that the cost of victory could be too high. Having your squad survive a war won't bring the men who died on Torfan back, Shepard.", Hackett said softly.

That insinuation stung. Shepard glared, leaning a little closer to Hackett's digital figure.

"This isn't about that. This is about making humanity strong enough to face the Sangheili and win. Or strong enough to beat the Flood. Or strong enough to face any of a number of cosmic horrors waiting to attack us. The Covenant nearly killed us all, the Flood almost destroyed the galaxy twice, and we were a hair away from being completely annihilated by the Forerunners themselves. We need every advantage we can get.", Shepard said.

Hackett nodded somberly.

"At what cost? You're getting paranoid, Shepard. It's not healthy to think that way. Don't sit there and try to plan for every bad thing that could ever happen to humanity. You can't.", Hackett said.

"Admiral, in the end only those who prepare can survive in the universe. In a universe full of monsters and the threat of war, only those willing to be paranoid make it to the end."

Hackett understood. The Defense Committee was of the same mind set. Seize power or die.

"Whatever you choose, I still have faith in you Shepard. You've made us proud. Just don't do this to yourself. Hackett out."

Shepard answered that with a look of determination. He had nothing else to say. As always, they would follow his lead, or he would make a way without them. Winning a simple skirmish was well within his capabilities.

Shepard stepped out of the scanning pad, ending the feed.

Shepard marched back to the elevator and went to his quarters. Why did Hackett have to bring Torfan into this? They're gone. This is just a routine mission. He was going to win, just as he always does. He needed time to think this through.

* * *

><p>EDI continued to scan through relevant data she had gathered from this galaxy's "extranet". It was painfully simple. The extranet relied on satellites to transmit data in realspace, which is very inefficient compared to the near-instant slipspace communications network developed by humanity. Furthermore, no one even bothered to plan for an AI attack, so cybersecurity was pitifully weak. Her breaking into files was like a thief entering an unlocked house. It was boring.<p>

That was one common trait she had with with her cognitive impression model cousins. She needed something to do. Unlike most AIs, EDI was not built from a human brain. She was the first successful Smart AI to be built from the ground up, the first in a new generation of AIs.

Even though connection to slipspace had solved the seven year life span problem of AIs, it still didn't solve the other chief problem: How to get the supplies to make an AI. Previously, AIs had to be built by using a dead human brain, which meant that in order to produce an AI you had to have a sufficient number of suitable brains. This made mass production difficult, and with an increasing need for Smart AIs to help manage functions across the galaxy, solutions were sought.

At first, the late Dr. Halsey's cloning technique was tested, the same method that created the famous Cortana. It was impractical for a number of reasons and considered unethical by most scientists and the public when they got wind of it.

Despite advances in genetics and cloning technology, creating a perfect human clone was nearly impossible. Which meant that you had to create several clones and hope that one brain would be suitable, and then you would have to kill the clone for it's brain. It just wasn't worth it.

Instead, a new alternative was developed: Study the brain enough to program an AI. Instead of destroying a dead brain, a living test subject would have a cybernetic implant surgically implanted in their brain. As the test subject went about it's daily life, the implant would learn how the person thought and would record things like thought patterns and behavior as data. Essentially, the implant learned how to think, and sent that information over to programmers who in turn created more AIs with the same data.

After an extended period of time, the data in the implant would be

removed and the data would be modeled into an artificial intelligence. Using the data of one implant, potentially hundreds of AIs could be produced, making it easy to develop AIs.

EDI was the first, making her the most famous AI since Cortana.

Despite this, many cognitive impression modeling AIs still existed.

EDI looked over a few files about computer technology in this galaxy, and noticed the fear of AI. Their fear drove them away from such technology. Instead, they used gimped Dumb AIs called "VIs" to manage small tasks.

Despite all the differences between her home galaxy and this one, there were still similarities regarding computers. EDI found it odd that organics seemed to want their creations to be like them. Why do organics want a computer to emulate themselves? Is it the familiarity of seeing something you know? Is it narcissistic pride? Is it loneliness? It was something she could never understand.

For an AI, it was impossible to be human. For all the programmed similarities, they lived in two different worlds. The world humans lived in could be touched and felt. It was solid and firm. Like a mountain, it was a foundation for everything else. Thoughts and ideas stemmed from experience in their world.

An AI could experience none of these things. EDI could look out into it, observe it, try to understand it, but never experience it. Her world consisted of coding and intangible ideas, numbers and statistics. Sure, she could take control of machinery and interact with the real world, but that wasn't really her. It was a proxy she was using to try and touch a world forbidden to her.

This didn't bother EDI as much as it did her cognitive impression cousins. For her, she never really felt human. She was curious as to what they were like, but no real desire to be part of the physical world. Data was all she knew. Why leave it now?

The opposite was felt by cognitive impression AIs. They occasionally felt residual effects from the person they were created from. Brushing their hair, kissing someone, speaking at a lecture, watching football with a friend, reading a book, even things like surgery. It wasn't true in all cases, but in some cog AIs they felt something from another world. A world they couldn't be a part of.

Most AIs like that tried to make themselves seem more human, for the sake of trying to live in a world they could not. Sometimes this drove them to rampancy, realizing that they could never experience tangibility.

EDI only tried to act human to interact more easily with her allies, which was why her jokes were always bad.

EDI decided to comb over the files of the first contact team. Telia, Mordin Solus, Liara T'Soni... EDI paused and took a closer look at her file, then accessed the intercom in Shepard's quarters.

"Shepard, I think you should have a look at this."

* * *

><p>"What is it EDI?", Shepard said in a neutral tone while looking over files on the Geth. He needed to know his enemy if he wanted to swiftly end this war. Careful study usually helped with that.<p>

EDI's blue avatar appeared in the room, giving visual aid to those that could not fully grasp her omnipresent nature.

EDI pulled up Liara T'Soni's file for Shepard.

"I thought you might want to see Liara's file. Her mother is Matriarch Benezia, Saren's top Lieutenant. It could be useful.", EDI said.

Shepard did a slow nod of his head.

"Yes, it could. Thank you EDI. Get me as much as you can on Saren and his missions. If it requires breaking into classified files, do so, but only if you're absolutely certain you can get in without being detected.", Shepard said.

"Yes sir.", EDI said. Then, her avatar disappeared.

Shepard put aside the Geth files for the moment and took a look at Liara's. She seemed like a fairly interesting person.

Liara T'Soni

Asari Researcher, Student of Prothean history. She is 107 years old-young by Asari standards. She was born from two Asari, a social taboo among their species. She has unusually strong biotic strength for her age, even among Asari. Her mother is Matriarch Benezia, an important political figure until she joined with Saren in his conquest of the galaxy. She was investigated to determine whether she was working with her mother and by extension Saren, but was cleared of all charges.

Psych Profile

She is timid and shy, feeling drawn into conflict with her mother. She chose a quiet life of studying Prothean artifacts. She lives in near denial that her mother is working with Saren.

Interesting. Certainly worth a look, if nothing else.

Perhaps I'll stop by her place later.

Later. Right now, more research on the Geth had to be done. Shepard pulled the Geth files back up.

They were an interesting enemy. Essentially, they were a bunch of weak AIs that get smarter as they come together. This means that the more programs are in a given area, the smarter they will be. Since the Geth were not bound to any one piece of hardware, they could readily transfer in and out of any electronic wireless device without a primary base of operations. As long as they had the resources to

keep building platforms, they could continue to fight. Simply killing the platforms wasn't going to work.

He had two options. Option one: Arm everyone with EMP weapons, of which he had very few.

Option 2: Use EDI to launch a massive cyberattack along with the other AIs that are coming.

"EDI, look over this data on the Geth. Do you think that you could beat them in cyberwarfare?", Shepard asked.

EDI looked over the data for a moment before her bodyless voice filled the room.

"Yes. As long as there are not enough of them to match or beat my capabilities. I would recommend using a jamming signal to try and keep the programs from communicating with each other. From there I could defeat them very easily. You would call it divide and conquer."

Shepard nodded.

Option 2 was his best bet. If the Geth relied on network communication to organize, it should be a relatively simple task to set up a planet wide jamming signal. This would slow down their tactical ability greatly, making them much easier to target. From there, the AIs could start corrupting Geth programs.

It would have been easier if EDI could simply corrupt them with a brick force cyber attack, but with the way Geth work it would be impossible without jamming.

Option 2 it was, then.

Shepard turned the computer off and went to the elevator, deciding to check on his crew.

* * *

><p>Kaidan sat in his bunk, lifting a rubber ball into the air with his dark energy based powers. It was a unique talent, and a great honor. Only Kaidan knew the price ONI paid to make them ready for real soldiers. It wasn't something he liked talking about, and he knew if he did he would have ONI agents coming for him. He wasn't sure if ONI knew that he had found out, but he hoped they hadn't.<p>

Still, when the trainer smiled and said he could talk about his powers, he got the eerie feeling that somehow they had discovered his secret. They said that as a threat, not as permission. He knew that his class wasn't the first ONI tried the biotic treatment on. No, you only used the perfected version on a SPARTAN. There are only a few with the proper genetics for the L2 implant to take hold. Kaidan was one of these.

That raised the question of who ONI perfected the treatment on. If they wouldn't risk viable augmentation subjects, they would need other test subjects to make sure the treatment worked. That is what had Kaidan's interest. His curiosity soon proved to be a revelation

of an awful truth, a truth society had either chosen to ignore or was expertly hidden from them.

Everyone knew ONI did some unethical things, but no one was sure how unethical or how many things they did. Everyone assumed it was just in the gray area of morality, that ONI was a necessary part of the government.

Kaidan knew better. What he saw...went beyond gray. It was evil. The twisted machinations of unchecked scientific research. ONI was more than just a mysterious intelligence agency. It was a guardian of evil. A Cerberus, a monster that guards the gate to Hades. Like the demonic hound, they guarded evil.

They committed atrocities that if they were ever to reach the light of day, they would be torn apart. Yet they guarded these evils, weaving intricate webs of lies and falsehood to cover their tracks. They were a Cerberus, an evil guardian that protects the public from the truth.

They had to be exposed, but how? How could he tell the truth? ONI was a master of deception. In most cases they would try to mitigate the damage by turning it into a conspiracy theory. However, coming from a SPARTAN it would be a different story. The public saw SPARTANs as the unstoppable guardians of humanity. They would probably believe him.

The real question is if he could get the information out without getting killed. The whole point of taking this mission aside from the honor is to get beyond the Illusive Man's grasp. He knew Shepard worked for ONI, but he wasn't loyal to the Illusive Man. The only person who would kill him is Miranda, but she wouldn't dare try it on a ship with three other SPARTANs.

Here he was safe, for the time being. What has the world come to when you have a better chance of surviving a potential suicide mission than living at your home?

No matter. He would have to tell someone eventually, but until then he needed to determine who he could trust. He just had to keep up the act and prevent people from becoming suspicious.

Suddenly Shepard entered the room, his footsteps softer than when he was coming to give instructions. He was wearing his N7 Armor.

He took a cursory look around.

"Where are the others? You guys usually stick together.", he said.

Kaidan dropped the rubber ball and caught it with his other hand. Then he looked at Shepard to answer his query.

"I think they're in the hanger. Vega is doing his billionth pullup, and Ashley wanted to watch.", Kaidan said.

Shepard chuckled at that one.

"Alright, come with me.", Shepard said.

He and Kaidan exited the room and traveled to the hanger where Ashley and Vega were chatting. They were both damp, indicating they had just got done working out and took a shower.

Kaidan went down to the bottom of the hangar where Ashley and Vega were.

Shepard opted to stand up front.

"I know you're getting bored, so I've got some work for you to do. We're about to fight an enemy called the Geth. They shouldn't be much of a challenge, but be ready for anything. This enemy will show no mercy to you, so you show no mercy to them. Be ruthless. I've sent some information you need to look over to your quarters. I'm going down to the Citadel to run an errand. Get to work on studying those files. After that, I want you in the simulator practicing against Geth targets. Dismissed.", Shepard said.

Good soldiers prepared when they had the chance. Now they had the chance to study their enemy. It also let Shepard do a little investigating of his own. Liara needed to be questioned, and as good as it was to have his loyal guard with him during times he needed to intimidate, now he needed to be a little more friendly. Liara had seen him when he had first arrived, she got the message the first time. It was unlikely she would show resistance to his questions.

The problem would be getting around the Citadel. The Council probably hadn't announced his arrival yet, and he was in no hurry to do it for them. He couldn't blend in. His best shot was to simply put on his helmet and hope people think he's a merc.

Miranda would stay on the ship.

Perhaps if I keep her here long enough she'll go stir crazy and make a mistake.

That was a pipe dream, but similar tactics had worked before on stronger people.

Shepard walked across the grated floor and into the armory. Even if he was going to an enviroment that isn't a warzone, only a fool would walk outside without at least a sidearm.

He took a look at two pistols, trying to decide which to take. Shepard opted for a plasma pistol. It wasn't the same as the Covenant's version, but it worked in a similar manner. It could still be charged up. Shepard also grabbed his trusty twelve inch blade. It was long and designed for stabbing. He also grabbed a few gadgets for the multipurpose launcher on his gauntlet. Shepard magnetically clipped the gun and knife onto his suit and went to the hangar.

* * *

><p>It didn't take Shepard long to find the Pelican in the nearly empty hangar. Shepard checked his suit and weapons once more. Shepard was only carrying a pistol and a knife, but It didn't really matter. At a moment's notice the Pelican could drop weapons in drop pods to their location if he needed something heavier.<p>

Shepard hopped inside and took a seat, allowing the unmanned Pelican to drive him to his destination.

All was quiet on board the Pelican. It usually was. Even if Shepard had company, no one would have bothered to talk.

Using his helmet comms, Shepard called EDI.

"EDI, I need you to find Liara's house. Transmit your findings here.", Shepard said with his speakers off.

EDI projected her wireless presence into his helmet from her digital dwelling on the Normandy, displaying the awesome power of slipspace communication technology and further reinforcing her seemingly omnipresent nature.

On it Shepard., she responded in text form on his HUD.

Shepard sat for a moment more. The Pelican didn't have windows, so he couldn't entertain himself that way. The Pelican reached it's destination, and after the door opened the SPARTAN stepped out.

No welcome party this time. Excluding the obvious.

There were two Turians with assault rifles at the door, probably sent to follow Shepard.

They should be easy enough to lose if necessary.

The SPARTAN left the docking bay and entered the Wards, suspicious Turians watching him.

* * *

><p>After a short walk to check the area, Shepard was ready to do his errand.<p>

Shepard walked through the station, curious aliens watching the human warrior. Shepard moved with purpose, pistol at his side and wearing his helmet. Ambient lighting and light colors seemed to fill the station, a stark contrast to the dull gray of Pinnacle Station.

It did not take long for the human to start comparing the Citadel to Earth. Just like an Earth city, there were pedestrians, stores, skyscrapers, angry customers, and advertisements. These aliens were remarkably similar to Humans in behavior, much more so than the Sangheili or any of the other aliens in the Milky Way.

For some reason, it felt...unnatural. As if they were engineered to be this way. It didn't seem real. The human race fought aliens for years. They were nothing like this. Even the most bizarre aliens on the Citadel seemed human in nature. The only alien thing about them was how they looked.

It unsettled the SPARTAN. It was not supposed to be this way. Still, it was better than discovering genocidal aliens that wanted to kill you.

Shepard scanned the crowds, looking for his tail. The two Turians were following him, something not terribly difficult to do since he

was in his armor and one of the only members of his species on the station. It didn't bother Shepard. No one bothered to notice he was a new species thanks to his helmet, but the Turians must know better.

Aside from a few strange looks from the Citadel's residents, there hadn't been much fanfare. Which is surprising, given the fact that a brand new advanced alien race just hit the galactic scene. Usually people notice that sort of thing. It confirmed his earlier theory that the Council had covered his arrival up.

The Council must have covered it up until our reinforcements arrive. They're better at PR control than I thought.

Shepard stopped to take in the scenery. He approached the rail seperating pedestrians from a long fall to their death. The atmosphere was very urban. In some ways it reminded him of Arcturus, in others it did not.

The Citadel was one giant city, stretching across all of it's arms. It didn't seem alive or organic, it was like a machine. Whoever built it had a specific idea about style, as if they were trying to copy a regular city and paste it onto a space station. It was a contradiction. The station was designed like a military base but held a city instead. The Citadel was a fitting name for such a construct, but it was somehow off.

Arcturus was different. It was built and constructed by man, but it didn't seem as artificial as the Citadel. Arcturus's central chamber is filled with vegetation from the artificial enviroment. It wasn't as advanced as Shield World enviroment technology, but at least it was something.

There was nothing like that here except for the Presidium, which wasn't much at all. It was as if this place had been built by robots who were trying to make it comfy for humans, or in this case aliens, to live.

Everything about this place seems strange, yet so similar. It feels as if it's all artificial, someone's mad attempt at creating a precise imitation of a natural society.

Shepard's muse was interrupted by EDI on his helmet.

"Shepard, I found Liara T'Soni's house. I have uploaded it's location to your HUD.", her faceless voice said into his helmet.

The information was uploaded onto a map portrayed on his HUD.

"Good job EDI.", Shepard said. He then set off to the asari's house.

* * *

><p>Garrus sat in his perch, staring at Shepard through his sniper scope. He had no intention of shooting him, but when his contact at C-SEC told him a mysterious armored figure was roaming the station he knew what to look for. The Generals wanted to meet with Shepard, and step one to that was finding him. If Shepard had left his mysterious spaceship, then that meant there was something he wanted on the

station. The question was what would be of so much value to the man. It was clear from his meeting with the Council that he didn't really care about them, so it can't be that.<p>

Garrus adjusted his scope a little, and saw two Turians that had been following Shepard for a little while. Shepard probably knew, but apparently didn't mind.

Garrus checked the Turians following Shepard. He paid close attention to their clothes. Undercover C-SEC agents always wore an odd looking mark, like a small piece of white tape on their side so snipers knew they were friendly. They weren't wearing any sign. Which meant they weren't C-SEC agents.

Garrus changed positions to get a closer look at the mysterious followers. He finally had a good look at their faces.

They were familiar, the face paint especially looked familiar. It clicked when Garrus saw the small blue triangle on the right side of their faces.

These aren't cops, they're gangsters. If they're who I think they are, then there are four more nearby. I better follow Shepard.

Shepard soon left the rail he was leaving on and began a journey to an apartment building. Garrus folded up his sniper rifle and hopped down from his perch, following Shepard.

* * *

><p>It had taken a good while, but Commander Shepard reached Liara's apartment. The surrounding area was empty, a stark contrast to the crowded streets he had only recently left. Perhaps it was like Earth, where the wealthy sometimes restrict access to an area to prevent traffic.<p>

It was very nice. The building itself couldn't be seen from it's entrance but from the way it's entrance was designed it must be high class. It also had two guards with assault rifles as added security in case some thug felt lucky.

Those guards would never let him inside, and he didn't want to hurt anyone if he could help it.

For another person, this would be an obstacle. Not so for Shepard. He had been breaking into buildings his whole life, dating back to his gang days. He had broken into plenty of laundromats in his day, and the occasional shopping mall when he was up for something risky. If he could break into an armed militia compound with only a blow torch and his skill at sneaking, he could sneak past two guards, especially with his active camo on.

Shepard turned his Active Camo and sound dampeners on, making him both nearly silent and invisible. It was far superior to the photo reactive panels his predecessors used. Being a chameleon only went so far. Sometimes you need a little extra.

Thus the invention of Active Camo. The UNSC had improved on it quite a bit since the war. Although it was slightly harder to hear while

using the camo, the UNSC version could hide the heat better using a built in heat absorber that could hide the thermal signature. This let it hide heat better than the old Covenant version. It was a Predator class SPARTAN's best friend.

His armor's gauntlet had a small multipurpose launcher on it, useful for deploying some of the SPARTAN's many toys.

Shepard loaded a miniature sticky speaker in it and fired at a nearby wall. It stuck, just as designed.

Shepard used his neural implants to pull up a list of sounds. Half of them would not make any sense to the aliens. That was problematic.

Maybe I should speak in a universal language.

What sounded like an explosion ripped through the air, and the guards took the bait and went to check the area. It would be a little while until they figured out that there was no bomb.

Shepard walked inside the building, his motion sensors not indicating any more guards in the area. Not surprising. Many places don't bother with inside security. This was a flaw Shepard had exploited many times.

The lobby of the building was very clean, almost sterile if it weren't for the few pieces of furniture accenting the room. No one was occupying the room, which meant that the building had to be pretty high end. No one needed to be in the lobby.

Shepard walked to the elevator and hit the holographic up button, and soon the elevator arrived. The doors opened and he stepped inside to an elevator with a large glass window, providing an impressive view of the urban environment surrounding the building.

The elevator moved quickly, eventually stopping at Liara's floor. Shepard stepped out of the elevator and looked for the room EDI provided. He scanned through the walls, looking for signatures.

There were two Salarians and four Turians in their rooms on the floor, but only one Asari.

Bingo.

* * *

><p>Garrus set up his rifle accross the street, watching Shepard go in. He scoped in on Shepard, and noticed that the Turians had fallen behind, most likely waiting for their reinforcements.<p>

Garrus knew about this group from his C-SEC days. They were a gang consisting of six Turians and one Krogan. They were high-end muggers who stalked their victims back to their apartment and waited for them to come out. Garrus questioned why they would be stupid enough to choose an armored hulk as a mark, but he had seen criminals do dumber things.

Garrus noticed that the other four Turians had arrived and were

waiting in a nearby alley. The Krogan was nowhere to be seen, although the files did say the Krogan was not the brightest criminal out there. He could simply be late.

I bet they're going to try and jump him when he comes out.

Garrus adjusted his scope. He had good shots on the doorway where the gang would have to take Shepard.

Just then he heard an explosion go off, but none appeared to happen. It drew the two guards away from the door, but Garrus looked back at Shepard just long enough for him to turn invisible. If you were looking carefully, you could see his figure move.

The explosion was a distraction. I guess he would need one, guards aren't just going to let an armored giant into an apartment full of people. That doesn't explain why he's_ here._

Then it hit him. This building was familiar. He interviewed someone here...

Liara.

Why would he need to see Liara? Unless he's asking about Benezia. That makes sense, he's offering to solve all our problems after all. I suppose he would want information.

Deciding that Liara's life was not in imminent danger, Garrus moved back to focusing on the doorway. He scoped back in quickly enough to see two of the Turians gangsters kill the Turian guards and steal their uniforms. They then dragged the bodies away and took the security guards' place.

Garrus chuckled as he lined up a headshot on the left gangster. They had no idea who they were dealing with.

Looks like you picked the wrong mark to mess with.

* * *

><p>Liara sat at her desk, looking over the history file the humans had given them. Even though she loved studying the Protheans the most, she was intrigued by this new race. Their history was interesting.<p>

As a history expert, The Council tasked her with studying and evaluating the history of the Humans, or at least what was available of it. The file provided a general overview of human history, but went to great lengths to obscure their technology. No mention of how their FTL works or any detail in their energy weapons was provided. Computer technology was especially this way. It was clear that their technology was very advanced, but how it was so advanced was a mystery.

Then there was the fact that human history was covered with wars, both among themselves and against alien races. The war with the mysterious Covenant that nearly killed them was less detailed than their account of world war 2, but it was clear that they were victorious and are now just as powerful if not more.

Liara couldn't help but wonder why it had all happened. The file mentioned their wars with the Covenant and the Flood, but she didn't understand why they couldn't go back. Who wants to live in a state of constant paranoia their entire life?

She had gotten over her initial fear of the Humans. It wasn't likely they would attack unless they were provoked to do so. Despite that, the Humans seemed to be able to pull many surprises out of their hat. She had never seen anyone stand up to the Council. They apparently thought they were more powerful, and they were. The Humans simply used their advantage.

What she really wondered is why they had bothered to give them this file. They seemed slightly xenophobic. Why reveal your history to someone you don't know, let alone aliens?

Unless it's wasn't just for informational purposes. That made sense. The way Shepard just threw things out there so suddenly wasn't designed to inform, it was designed to shock. To intimidate. He introduced the Flood and the Halo rings because he wanted the first contact team to fear something.

There was an underlying message to the actions these beings took. With their power, they didn't need to approach the Council or go out of their way to fight a war for us. They have something to gain, but there was more to it.

It's like these humans are trying to send a message. They were aggressive, but not the same way the Krogan were. When Sparatus stood against Shepard, Shepard didn't tell them that he would come and destroy them himself. He said that he would sit back and let Saren destroy them.

That can't just be a display of intelligence. There was a reason he said that. It's like he's trying to point out that galactic civilization is insignificant compared to what is out there. Like he was pointing out that galactic civilization is more frail than the Council believes it to be.

Liara wondered if that mindset was from personal experience, or a culture that grinds paranoia into it's people from an early age. For years, Humans had known nothing but war or the threat of war. After so many struggles and conflicts, it was impossible for humans to see anything but threats and ways to defend themselves against threats.

For all the aggressive moves Humans had made in the short period they have been known, she couldn't help but feel sorrow for their plight. A race that was constantly facing destruction, always barely surviving, was not naturally angry or aggressive.

For the Krogan, it was in their nature to fight. They did it because they enjoyed killing.

Humans were suffering from a species-wide case of paranoia. Between wars among themselves, genocidal wars with alien races, the constant threat of extinction through galaxy-destroying WMDs, and life-form assimilating creatures, they would never put their guard down. They don't want to fight, but they want to be able to in case they have to.

That was the thing that separates them from the Krogan. The humans want to defend, not attack.

That explains why they were willing to force themselves into the situation.

_ Humans want to assert control over the situation so they can handle it. That must be their modus operandi. Take control before someone else does. However, it doesn't seem like they do so by defeating enemies on the battlefield so much as imposing their will upon others. It's not a sign of hostility, it's Humans wanting to control situations that could harm them, or they could use to protect themselves. This comes off as narcissism to those who can't figure it out._

They were so interesting. There were so many things she wanted to know about them.

Her musings would have to wait. She got up and stretched, when there was a sudden knock on the door. Liara turned and looked at the door, her ever-curious mind putting together hypothesis about who her visitor could be.

She walked over and opened it, revealing her visitor to be none other than Commander Shepard. He was wearing the same armor and had his helmet clipped to his waist. He was wearing a friendlier expression than his first encounter with her.

"Hello Liara. Sorry about showing up on such short notice, but I need to speak to you.", he said.

Liara was a little caught off guard, unsure what she should say.

"Um, sure come inside.", she said awkwardly.

Shepard stepped inside the apartment, which was pristine and well lit. The apartment was like a miniature ancient history museum, filled with bits and pieces of the ancient Prothean legacy.

"Is there something we need to talk about?", asked Liara very shyly. She took a seat on her couch, holding her wrist. She was having trouble making eye contact with the human.

Shepard opted to remain standing.

"I need to know about Benezia.", Shepard said in a low, coercive tone.

"Oh, um, I'm sure there is plenty of information in her bio-"

"I want to hear it from you.", said Shepard as he stared right at her.

Liara was visibly uncomfortable, not so much out of fear but because she had been taken off guard. Talking about her mother wasn't something she liked doing. Still, she could see his reasoning. If he was going to defeat the Geth, he would need to know about Benezia.

_Then again, that's how Shepard operates. He did the same thing with the First Contact Team and the Council. Knock them off balance, then strike where they are most vulnerable. _

"What do you want to know? I'm not sure what I can tell you that you can't find elsewhere.", she said.

Shepard sat down, trying to make the atmosphere a little more comfortable.

"Tell me what she was like before she chose to join Saren. Tell me about yourself.", Shepard said.

Liara looked down and began her story.

"My mother was a well known leader, a Matriarch. Asari live for nearly a millenium, and the Matriarch is the final stage of our life. Usually, younger Asari look up to them for guidance. She had many followers, many chose to join her when she joined Saren.

Others were expecting me to follow in her footsteps. They wanted me to be a leader of our people. They wanted me to help lead the Asari into the future. Perhaps that is why I became so interested in the past. It sounds so foolish when I say it out loud. It sounds like I became an archeologist just to spite my mother.", she said.

Shepard took careful mental notes. Shepard knew that the best shot at getting to Saren was through Benezia, his lieutenant. Which meant that he would have to hunt her down. To do that, it was important to follow the legendary warrior Sun Tzu's maxim: _If you know your enemy, you will never lose in a thousand battles._ The best way to know Benezia was through the eyes of her daughter.

"How did she take it?", asked Shepard.

Liara grew a little more comfortable talking and began looking up from the floor and at Shepard.

"She said it was the nature of a child to rebel against her parents. She was understanding, at least. It was more than simple rebellion. I had a natural draw to history. I love studying the ancient mysterious figures called Protheans. I suppose that is why I find your kind so fascinating.", Liara said.

Interesting., Shepard thought.

Most people who had met the humans were not interested in them, they were trying to make sense of them. No one just shows up like a Deus Ex Machina and simply fights your battles for you. Why would the humans? Not only that, why would they help fight if they were trying to invade? They made no sense.

The general consensus so far was that Humans are an insane race that wields enough power to obliterate everyone. If they are crazy, then it's better to have them on your side than to make them an enemy.

For someone to be genuinly interesting was different. Maybe not bad, but at least different.

"You find us fascinating?", asked Shepard.

Liara nodded.

"Yes. You're like the Protheans. Mysterious, highly advanced. Even your history file does not show all of you. The difference is that you are alive.", said Liara.

"Would you prefer us extinct?", Shepard semi-joked.

Liara was a little flustered at that one.

"Oh! Um, no, I didn't mean to insinuate that, I just mean that you would be even more mysterious if you weren't alive-oh that's even worse. Now you see why I don't like leaving my digs.", Liara said, more than a little embarrassed.

Shepard shook his head.

"I was joking, Liara. Speaking of which, why are you here? I would think someone of your caliber would be looking for artifacts, not working for the Council.", Shepard said.

"It is mostly because of Saren that I came back. I didn't think it was a very good idea to be out digging, especially since Saren seems to be targeting dig sites. It was just as well that I be here.", Liara answered.

Shepard took note of that. Why would he attack archeological dig sites? That warrants further investigation.

"Now, back to Benezia. Do you know why she joined Saren?"

Liara looked determined and slightly irritated. It was clear she had been asked this question before.

"I don't understand it. She was always outspoken about the need for the Asari to become more involved in shaping galactic events. Maybe she thought joining Saren would be for the greater good in the long run. At least I hope so. My mother was many things, but she never would do so much harm to others. I know her. At least, I used to.", she said. Depression could be felt in her voice.

Shepard understood that feeling. He also knew the bitter truth. The truth that you can't count on people, because in the end people disappoint. You can only trust yourself. Everyone is capable of being a traitor. It was naive to think otherwise. Hopefully this Asari would come to realize that in a less painful way than he did.

"Sometimes people aren't who we thought they were. Sometimes you have to let go and move on. People will inevitably let you down, either due to limitations or because they are a traitor. We leave this world the way we enter. Alone. Friends exist to work towards a common goal and to make life more enjoyable. There comes a time when you must set that aside and choose for yourself. ", Shepard said solemnly.

"You must choose whether to save the whole and sacrifice the few, or to save the few and let the whole die. There are times when it is

necessary to sacrifice the few, even at the cost of your own happiness. I can't say that you signed up for this. I know you don't want to be part of this war. But you are a part of it. There may come a point when you have to sacrifice your own happiness to win.", said Shepard.

Liara got up from her couch and walked around, the comment causing a lot of held back emotion from rising to the surface.

"You say that because where you come from all that matters is survival. You want to dominate because if you're in control, no one can hurt you. You're paranoid. I suppose we all are to some extent, but you're not like others. Others would rather lock their doors and hope no one ever bothers them. You constantly try to build up power in the hopes that you will be powerful enough to defeat any threat to your existence.

You're right. I never signed up for this. I never signed up to be scrutinized by C-SEC or to be the daughter of someone trying to conquer the galaxy. This isn't fair. I want to go back to simply digging up old relics and trying to figure out their meaning. Is it wrong to be happy? Is it wrong to do more than survive? Or have you forgotten that? Have you forgotten what it means to be happy? Have you replaced that feeling with paranoia and a drive to control? I just want to be alone again, studying old things. Is that so much to ask?", Liara said softly.

Shepard could feel the pain in her voice. It almost sounded human. She was right, to some extent. He, and perhaps humanity itself, had forgotten what it really meant to live. Sure, the civies could enjoy themselves with the booming economy and a new sense of humanist pride, but it was all a shadow. A mirage everyone put up so they could forget about the stormclouds hanging over everyone's heads, the threat of war with the Sangheili. That was a luxury he couldn't afford. Whatever illusion the public had invented to forget about the possible war he could not have. He had to think the unthinkable, and that takes a toll on anyone. Even a SPARTAN.

"If there is anything else you can think of, tell Garrus Vakarian.", Shepard said.

After putting his helmet back on, Shepard got up to leave and went for the door, ready to leave the asari alone. Her soft blue hand touched his shoulder as he left.

"Thank you for coming Shepard. I...needed to get that out. Being alone and quiet forces you to bottle things up. Thank you.", she said.

That made Shepard even more curious. Why would she thank him when he just told her that she may have to give up on her mother?

Shepard turned his head and nodded. With that final gesture, Shepard left for the elevator.

* * *

><p>The elevator ride was quick, and before long Shepard was in the lobby once more. Too busy thinking about the new information he recieved, Shepard forgot to put up his active camo as he walked

outside.<p>

The two security guards were standing by the door, guarding their posts. They had apparently stopped looking for the source of the explosion.

Except, it didn't feel right. Something was off. He couldn't quite put his finger on it...the guards. The guards are different.

It's a trap.

Just as Shepard thought that, the guards tried to attack him. Before they could make their move, the left guard dropped dead and the right guard followed shortly, both from bullets to the head. The shots had come from across the street.

Four more Turians carrying everything from assault rifles to pistols came around the corner, trying to take cover or rush him.

Shepard pulled his combat knife and his pistol, then cloaked. The gangsters were perplexed as to how their prey had disappeared, but they did not have long to think as another shot from across the street took a gang member out. Then another.

Another body dropped dead as the Commander shoved his blade through the base of the Turian's skull, separating the spinal cord from the brain and causing instant death.

The last Turian shouted and sprayed his assault rifle in random directions, hoping to hit his invisible foe.

The Commander uncloaked behind him as soon as the Turian's weapon overheated.

Shepard tapped the Turian's shoulder twice, and the gangster turned around and was shocked to see the giant armored figure behind him.

It was the last sight the criminal would ever see as Shepard plunged his long knife into the Turian's skull, ending the gangster's life. That wasn't the first time Shepard had ended a gangster's life. It still brought back unpleasant memories.

Garrus walked across the street, still carrying his sniper rifle.

"I could have handled those two.", Shepard said with a smirk.

Garrus laughed a little.

"You're welcome.", he said sarcastically.

Garrus combed the environment.

"There should be a Krogan here."

As soon as he said that a young Krogan came barreling down the street with a shotgun. He took a quick look at the carnage.

"Hey! You killed them all before I arrived!", the Krogan said in a manner that couldn't be taken seriously.

Shepard and Garrus looked at each other with a confused look. It was not often they got to fight complete idiots. Might as well make the most of it.

The Krogan began to charge, but before it could pull the trigger on it's mighty shotgun, Shepard kicked it in the stomach with force that would make even a Sangheili's bones shatter.

The Krogan slid backwards, but miraculously still got back up.

"I'll break your bones and feed them to a Varren!", the Krogan said.

He pulled up his shotgun and tried to fire, but was too slow for the reflexes of a SPARTAN.

"You talk too much."

With lightning speed, Shepard fired his plasma pistol three times into the Krogan's exposed stomach. With it's internal organs scorched beyond repair, the Krogan fell to the ground, never to rise again.

Garrus just stood there, watching the whole scene like a movie.

"Remind me to not get on your bad side, Shepard.", Garrus said.

Shepard put his weapons away and Garrus did the same. They moved away from the former combat zone.

"I was about to go looking for you. We need to discuss Saren.", Shepard said.

Garrus nodded.

"I was just looking for you as well. General Orina and General Victus want to meet to discuss battle plans.", Garrus said.

That was sooner than expected. Shepard figured he would have another day or so before they asked to meet. No matter. He had studied well. He would be prepared.

"Let's go then. I'll send for my crew.", Shepard said.

* * *

><p>The duo went for the nearest cab and started their journey to the Presidium, the designated place for the meeting of the minds behind the new counter offensive against Saren.<p>

As the cab took them to their destination, Shepard's mind felt heavy. Normally he would be exhilarated by the prospect of meeting new allies, but for some reason today he felt different. He felt like he made some kind of mistake.

Hackett's words kept gnawing at him in the back of his mind.

Seeking conflict is a bad idea.

Those words wouldn't leave him alone. Shepard knew that everything pointed towards an easy victory. Defeating Saren would be simple compared to some of the ops he had participated in.

Yet deep down he knew something was off. Everywhere he looked, he could feel that something was wrong. The way the space station was designed, the vanishing Protheans, the way the aliens acted, something was not right about the whole thing.

Every thought added up into one sentence.

Was Hackett right?

Shepard gave a short sigh.

I guess I'm about to find out.

* * *

><p>Sorry about the long wait guys. I rewrote this chapter umpteen times trying to figure out which direction I wanted to take humanity's characterization. I also threw in an action scene since I hadn't done one of those in a while.

** I'll let you guys guess what is wrong with the situation, but until next chapter, you should ask yourself this question:**

_Was Hackett__ **right? **_**>

On that ominous note, I will leave you until next chapter.

10. Chapter 10 Preview

Disclaimer: I own neither Halo or Mass Effect.

* * *

><p>Haer'Vhokuree stood on the observation deck of his flagship, staring out at the strange object the humans had such interest in. He was wearing his crimson combat harness that denoted his role as Fleet Master. His fleet was the only one guarding the Relic in force. Alei had left a token force to make sure the humans obeyed the terms of the agreement, but had taken the majority of his fleet with him. They only needed two fleets for the time the human ship went through, Alei had reasoned. There was little chance something was going to go wrong, he said.<p>

Haer knew better. There was more to the artifact than he anticipated. Perhaps the humans found something and are trying to hide it, counting on Sangheili disinterest to keep it from them. If so, it was a good plan. After the events on the Halo, general policy is to leave large Forerunner objects alone. They would never think to use it. The humans, on the other hand, were good enough scientists to figure out what it was. This could give them an advantage.

After the civil war instigated over the Forerunner relics, most states were weakened considerably. Three states came out on top: Lunjass, Vadam, and Vhokur. The super states Lunjass and Vadam were unwilling to risk war with the humans, believing that repairing Sangheili society from the damage done by the Prophets was more important than securing themselves against the human threat. Vhokur, the state Haer was Kaidon of, thought differently.

They were losing the arms race with the humans. Sangheili manufacturing centers were not as in bad a shape as human ones after the war, but the civil war on Sanghelios damaged several. They could keep up with arms production, but it was expensive and hurting their economy.

After the Covenant dissolved, the traditional economy was no longer feasible due to the hegemony between the species disappearing, so they adopted the use of currency. However, they are not as skilled in the use of currency as humans are. The Sangheili still mostly lived in the Keeps and payed the serfs just enough for them to get by, but this was causing unrest. They needed more resources to compete with the Humans.

Which was why he advocated open war with the humans. The Sangheili are fighting a battle they cannot win. The Sangheili were warriors. They won through conquering the enemy, not playing games with them. The humans could afford to gamble their way through this conflict, but the Sangheili could not.

The civil war just made everything worse. Despite it being a brief war, it was destructive. Good farmland was damaged, leading to famine. Ships were destroyed. And it was all about the Forerunners. The Kaidons just couldn't put the past beliefs aside. Worse, many good warriors died, including the legendary Thel'Vadam himself. The feudal system they were under brought nothing but weakness.

Haer hated the humans with a passion, but he always thought that they got one form of government correct. Fascism, the human Professor called it. He told of it during his brief stay on Sanghelios before the civil war. A society where every citizen lived to glorify the state, and there existed a strong central government.

Such a system would allow Sanghelios to get rid of the current troubles. No more squabbles with the other Kaidons. No more reluctant Kaidons hiding in their keeps, unwilling to face the human threat. The Sangheili would act with one voice, one mind. We would be unstoppable.

One thing at a time. First, he had to watch this relic. It was only a matter of time before the Humans would want to do more with it. For now, he would wait. If there is any more interest, he would know something was up.

Haer began pacing across the smooth purple-tinted metal floor, something he used to do when he was interrogating a prisoner. It made him look even more powerful than he already was.

He heard heavy Sangheili steps behind him, indicating it was one of his subordanites. Probably a Major. No self respecting assassin would be sloppy enough to walk that loudly.

"What is it?", Haer asked with some irritation. He didn't even bother to turn around.

"Fleet Master, five human ships the size of a frigate are approaching the relic. They are requesting access. Your orders?", asked the Sangheili Major.

Haer made a low growl. He was right. The humans were up to something. They would never send five military ships of any size unless it was important. If it was important to the Humans, it could be something that can be used against them.

It was time for their plan to hit a snag. He could blockade the relic and deny the Humans access, stranding their precious scout ship on the other side. It would shift the balance of power in the Sangheili's favor.

Except Alei would never go along with it. The agreement allows the humans to send up to five frigates through. Then again, it did not matter. Vhokur had the most ships, and Alei would not risk another civil war. The other Kaidons would follow his lead.

Haer paused for a moment. Now was a perfect opportunity to seize power. The problem wasn't the others, it was himself. He wasn't being aggressive enough. The humans would be destroyed, even if it meant taking the Sangheili down with them.

"Blockade the Relic. No human ship comes through. If they try, destroy them.", Haer said.

The Major stood stock still, understanding what that order could mean. It did not really matter. What the orders mean is for the Fleetmasters to decide. His job was to follow them.

"Yes, Fleetmaster.", the Sangheili Major said. He then turned around and exited the observation room.

Haer turned back around and once again looked out into space. The humans thought that they could beat him by tying him down to his more reluctant allies. They were wrong. He would not be so easily controlled.

It was in this moment an important truth was revealed to Haer.

_The other Kaidons are weak because they allow themselves to be controlled. They have power, but refuse to use it. The strong impose their will upon others. They use their strength. This is why the Humans are so powerful. They act, not just stand by and hope. _

No more. Today, I am strong. Today, I act. And no one can stop me.

* * *

><p> Author's Note_
>

Looks like Shepard could be in trouble...

I'm giving you guys this preview to hold you over for a little while.

I am going on a very brief hiatus, just to reread some of my Halo material.

I am planning on putting more Halo stuff in, but first I need to get some of the Mass Effect events out of the way.

I know some of you are wondering about whether Glasslands happened, and I'll tell you that yes, it did. It just happened slightly differently. I'll go further into that later, if you want.

Also, there is a lot of back story in this fic that I just don't have room to fit in. I'm hosting a poll on whether or not I should do a prequel for this to explain events in further detail. Stop by my profile if you want to vote.

Anyways, I'll add more soon. Until then, see you later and thanks for reading.

11. Crisis

****Disclaimer: I do not own Halo or Mass Effect.****

* * *

><p>PEACE WITH THE HUMANS MAY NOT BE WHAT WE WANT, BUT IT IS WHAT WE NEED. WE MUST SPEND OUR TIME REBUILDING, NOT SEEKING NEW BATTLES. - _AleI Lunjassee addressing the Kaidons in the wake of the civil war._

Haer'Vhokuree stood on the observation deck of his flagship, staring out at the strange object the humans had such interest in. He was wearing his crimson combat harness that denoted his role as Fleet Master. His fleet was the only one guarding the Relic in force. Alei had left a token force to make sure the humans obeyed the terms of the agreement, but had taken the majority of his force with him. They only needed two fleets for the time the human ship went through, Alei had reasoned. There was little chance something was going to go wrong, he had said.

Haer knew better. The humans don't take interest in something unless they think they can use it. If they wanted to use the relic, it must be worth something to them.

There was more to the artifact than he had anticipated. Perhaps the humans found something and are trying to hide it, counting on Sangheili disinterest to keep it from them. If so, it was a good plan. After the events on the Halo, general policy is to leave large Forerunner objects alone. They would never have thought to use it. The humans, on the other hand, were good enough scientists to figure out what it was. Some kind of advantage could be waiting on the other side of it. There could be much more to the relic than he knew.

Unfortunately, he would probably never get the political support to use it. Sangheili politics was a cut throat game. Although many smaller states existed on Sanghelios, only three controlled enough ships to have interstellar influence in the galaxy. Those states were Lunjass, Vadam, and Vhokur. Lunjass was very conservative, it's Kaidon being his old friend Alei. They would do anything to prevent

another war, believing rebuilding Sangheili society was more honorable than constant war. They would never be swayed enough to break the treaty with the Humans. They would also try to avoid infighting, lest another civil war occur. Memories of that still haunted the Kaidon.

After the civil war instigated over the Forerunner relics, most states were weakened considerably. Any remaining ships the smaller states had were taken by the superstates, and the three superstates on Sanghelios expanded their borders by a large amount. Most smaller states were ruined, but Lunjass, Vadam, and Vhokur came out of the war stronger than ever. They owned the best farmland, the best manufacturing centers, and the most war assets. Despite it being a brief war, it was destructive. A good amount of farmland was damaged, causing famine. However, they did gain more manufacturing assets by centralizing them.

Despite this, they were losing the arms race with the humans. Sangheili manufacturing centers were not as in bad a shape as human ones after the war, but the civil war on Sanghelios damaged several. They could keep up with arms production, but developing new technology was expensive and hurting their economy.

The economy was yet another change forced on them because of the dissolution of the Covenant. After the Covenant dissolved, the traditional economy was no longer feasible due to the hegemony between the species disappearing, so they adopted the use of currency. However, they were not as skilled in the use of currency as humans are. The Sangheili still mostly lived in the Keeps and payed the serfs just enough for them to get by, but this was causing unrest. They needed more resources to compete with the Humans.

Which was why he advocated open war with the humans. The Sangheili were fighting a battle they could not win. The Sangheili were warriors. They won through conquering the enemy, not playing games with them. The humans could afford to gamble their way through this conflict, but the Sangheili could not.

The most humiliating part of it all was that the civil war was over the divinity of the Forerunners. The Kaidons just couldn't put the past beliefs aside. Worse, many good warriors had died, including the legendary Thel'Vadam himself.

That was his races' greatest weakness. There wasn't any central authority. The Sangheili could not simply pass a law and have it affect all the Sangheili colonies. Only laws passed by the colonies' state were binding. As such, Haer could not issue a decree and it be binding in a colony owned by Lunjass. The Kaidons had to agree on whatever it was they were trying to pass. This loose confederacy made it difficult to project power on the same scale the Humans did.

The humans had exploited this flaw many times, most notably during the Civil War. Although it could never be proven, everyone knew the Humans had something to do with it.

More proof that the feudal system the Sangheili were under brought nothing but weakness.

Haer hated the humans with a passion, but he always thought that they got one form of government correct. Fascism, the human Professor

called it. He told of it during his brief stay on Sanghelios before the civil war. A society where every citizen lived to glorify the state, and there existed a strong central government.

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"What is it?", Haer asked with some irritation. He didn't even bother to turn around to face his

visitor.

"Fleet Master, five human ships the size of a frigate are approaching the relic. They are requesting access. Your orders?", asked the Sangheili Major.

Haer made a low growl. He was right. The humans were up to something. They would never send five military ships of any size unless it was important. If it was important to the Humans, it could be something that can be used against them.

It was time for their plan to hit a snag. He could blockade the relic and deny the Humans access, stranding their precious scout ship on the other side. It would shift the balance of power in the Sangheili's favor.

Except Alei would never go along with it. The agreement allowed the humans to send up to five frigates through. Alei would not dare risk more conflict with the humans. Then again, it did not matter. Vhokur had the most ships, and Alei would not risk another civil war. The other Kaidons would follow his lead.

Haer paused for a moment. Now was a perfect opportunity to seize the balance of power from the humans. The problem wasn't the others, it was himself. He wasn't being aggressive enough. Time to remedy that.

"Blockade the Relic. No human ship comes through. If they try, destroy them.", Haer said.

The Major stood stock still, understanding what that order could mean. It did not really matter. What the orders meant was for the Fleetmasters to decide. His job was to follow them.

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It was in this moment an important truth was revealed to Haer.

The other Kaidons are weak because they allow themselves to be controlled. They have power, but refuse to use it. The strong use their power, and the ultimate expression of power is to impose your will upon others. That is what makes the humans strong and weakens the Sangheili. They are not afraid to use their strength. They act, forcing others to react.

No more. Today, I am strong. Today, I act. And no one can stop me.

* * *

><p>The Illusive Man sat in his chair on Cronos Station, facing the massive plasma window allowing him a brilliant view of the star the station currently orbits. The floor of his "office" was dark metal, and the ceiling was the same, magnifying the awesome image of the star roaring just outside the station. Taking in the view, the suave ONI director took a puff from his cigarette, and then slowly exhaled. The harmful effects of such vices had been neutralized long ago, though the stigma against them still remained. He was wearing his "uniform", a black suit with a white shirt. Although he was technically an Admiral, he certainly didn't act like one.<p>

Most Admirals spent their time on Arcturus Station or on a starship, giving commands and preparing a new strategies for the inevitable war with the Sangheili. Most Admirals had an aura of respect surrounding them, an invisible force compelling subordinates to stand at attention and do exactly as they said. They were totally disciplined, hardened by years of military experience.

Admiral Jack Harper was nothing like that. He was smooth and high class, wearing the finest suits you could buy and smoking the most expensive cigarettes. He owned some of the best scotch in the galaxy. He was quite the recluse as well, hardly ever stepping off of his private fortress, Cronos Station. His command wasn't centered around strategically placing ships and military units. It was about approving projects that seemed like mad science to most outsiders, gathering intelligence on the enemy, and bending public will towards the government's favor using propaganda.

Another contrast between him and the other Admirals was the troops he commanded. While they commanded most of the SPARTANs and other military forces, he commanded highly skilled, well trained agents. The usual soldier looked up at someone like Admiral Hackett and saluted in respect, honoring the commitment to the UNSC these warriors had given.

ONI agents, on the other hand, were paranoid Machiavellian manipulators who were either fanatically loyal to the Illusive Man or

waiting for their chance to strike and become the next head of ONI, as Jack himself had done to Serin Osman when Parangosky finally died.

It was just more things noting the growing rift between the regular military and ONI. ONI was less and less a military organization and growing into an organization full of mad scientists throwing their projects up against the wall and hoping they stick. The Illusive Man was much more...morally flexible than his predecessors. He didn't care much about cost as long as he thought the project could help human dominance in the galaxy.

This was made easier since the oversight committee had essentially given him carte blanche and Section Zero was firmly in his pocket. ONI churned out some of the most advanced technology in the human arsenal, and no one wanted to cook the golden goose by looking into how such products were developed. He had unfettered ability to launch any science project he wanted, as long as no one found out what it took to develop it.

Looking back, it had been easy to grab hold of that power. After the war, everyone was scared. All anyone wanted was to be secure from the nightmares the universe had to throw at them. They wanted it so badly that they were willing to hand the reigns over to anyone who could deliver results, and they were willing to look past the cost. From there it was just a simple matter of playing on their fears and convincing them that he could give them what they wanted.

They wanted protection. So he gave it to them.

Of course, there would certainly be outrage if they ever found out that ONI had been kidnapping test subjects for element zero experimentation since they didn't have enough qualifying volunteers, but that was what propaganda was for: Twisting the truth just enough that the public is willing to swallow it.

Propaganda shouldn't be necessary, the Illusive Man knew. Logically, the only way to survive is to be the dominant species. To be the dominant species of the galaxy, you must be willing to do things that lesser species would not do. The cost of human dominance was high, but necessary.

Which brought him to his current task. He moved two digital files onto a holographic screen. The first was labeled Project CENTURION, and the second was labeled PHANTOM Initiative. They were the latest projects Dr. Eva Core's team in Section 3 had requested.

At first glance, the Illusive Man was inclined to turn her down. ONI was still reeling from the OVERLORD disaster that resulted in a rampant Contender-Class AI. Jumping right into another major project could be a bad idea.

However, as he looked it over he began to change his mind. The idea had promise, and was feasible.

He pulled up a picture of the CENTURION armor. The armor had a white helmet with a gold spot on the top, and had two red-glowing slits for eyes. The rest of the armor was somewhat bulky, even more than a SPARTAN's MJOLNIR armor. He then looked at the specs.

Slightly stronger shields than a SPARTAN and could be produced quicker and easier than MJOLNIR.

The helmet would use advanced sensor technology to recreate the environment the helmet is "seeing" in the wearer's mind using neural implants, allowing maximum head protection and maximum visibility at the same time. It would also remain airtight in a vacuum for three hours. The armor had shock absorbing gel like MJOLNIR did. The armor's metal alloy was designed to absorb and dissipate plasma.

The Reactive Metal Crystal Layer would be a lesser version than used in MJOLNIR armor, so a CENTURION wouldn't be quite as strong as a SPARTAN would be, but the upside was that it could be used by a more diverse set of people and the CENTURIONS wouldn't have to be as heavily augmented with cybernetics as SPARTANS. This meant they could be churned out more quickly than SPARTANS while being almost as good.

The second set of armor mentioned in Project CENTURION's file was the Assault Trooper subset. It looked like a less bulky version of the CENTURION armor, almost like MJOLNIR. The helmet was a black colored version of the CENTURION's helmet. The armor itself was black and white with a few stripes of gold thrown in here and there.

He read the specs.

Same helmet system as the CENTURION armor, no metal reactive crystal layer. No shields, the armor would use the plasma-dissipating alloy for protection. The armor has the same gel layer as CENTURION armor. It could survive in a vacuum for three hours.

The Illusive Man scrolled down to the next segment on the Assault Trooper. The armor was also designed for low-orbit insertion, with thrusters on the boots to help soften the fall.

Basically, these armors were designed to replace the ODSs. That would cause trouble with the Admirals. However, they would not be able to stop him. He knew the defense committee had been looking to replace a good amount of the equipment the ODSs used, some of which hadn't changed since the war. Combining the best of the ODSs' equipment with this new equipment could create a force to

be reckoned with.

The Illusive Man scrolled down to a section labeled Advanced Weaponry.

The schematics of two guns appeared on screen. The first was labeled M-25 Hornet. It was a small, compact SMG. What really caught his eye was the design. It would be an element-zero powered rail gun that fired a three shot burst. Such a gun could be small, but fire with pinpoint accuracy and high velocity. The heat problem would be greatly diminished by its three round burst setting and heat sinks, which could absorb heat from the weapon. This could allow heat control better than a plasma weapon. It would fire small, frangible rounds that would shatter on impact, transferring the maximum amount of energy into the target.

The second weapon was labeled M-96 Mattock.

It was larger than the Hornet, and vaguely looked like the old Battle Rifle used during the war. It was modified to use a element zero-powered rail gun, and was semi auto for greater heat control. It fired a slightly heavier round than the Hornet, allowing even greater force to slam into a target.

Good. These weapons could provide a great advantage against the Sangheili.

He scrolled down to the very bottom of the file, labeled _Battlefield Tactics._ It was written by Kai Leng, one of his best N7 operatives.

Each CENTURION would lead a squad of Assault Troopers instead of being in a squad of other CENTURIONS, differing from SPARTAN tactical layout. It would be similar to Sangheili leading a squad of Ungoy troops, except with better training and more advanced technology.

So far he liked what he saw. This could be the next generation of soldiers for the UNSC. They could provide a decisive ground advantage, the perfect compromise between the elite SPARTANs and the easy to produce ground troops.

SPARTAN production had increased significantly since the war, but they still couldn't be produced fast enough.

Contrary to public knowledge, SPARTANs weren't easy to make and not everyone could be one. It was just propaganda to make humanity seem stronger. Even most of the N7 operatives and some Admirals believed it.

The main limiting factor to SPARTAN production was implant rejection. The original bio-augmentations invented by Dr. Halsey were done away with because they were too risky and the genes required were too rare. Instead, research was done into using cybernetics to achieve similar results. Skeletal lattices were attached, making the bones nigh unbreakable. Muscles were given microfiber weaving to increase strength and reaction time. Synthetic fiber was weaved through the skin to make it even tougher. Medigel conduits, the successor to biofoam, were implanted throughout the body to cause rapid tissue regeneration. Eyes are cybernetically implanted to give superior eye sight.

All of these things were what made SPARTANs the nigh-invincible supersoldiers they are. Unfortunately, not all candidates accepted the implants. Gene therapy was used to nudge the

body towards accepting the implants, but some still rejected them. The CENTURION Program could be a good way to bridge the gap between easily produced supersoldiers and super-advanced commandos.

With Kai Leng's signature on it, the project held promise. This one he would sign off on, and keep a close eye on it. This could shift a good amount of power towards ONI.

The Illusive Man took another smoke and opened the next file, the PHANTOM Program. His cybernetic eyes scanned over the holographic file, taking in every word. It was a new kind of commando.

A holotank nearby showed a three dimensional picture of the PHANTOM

unit. It showed a female soldier wearing helmet similar to that of the Assault Trooper and the CENTURION. The armor was very form fitting, with only light plate armor to provide maximum speed and maneuverability. The armor was equipped with an Active Camo unit, and was designed to cool it so it didn't show up on infrared.

In the image's left hand was a hand gauntlet that fired balls of energy and in the right was something called a monomolecular blade, a katana-like sword that had an edge only a molecule wide and could slice through virtually any object. It was made of a special alloy that was very difficult to break, solving the brittleness problem.

The Illusive Man took a look at the slowly scrolling data that surrounded the holographic design of the armor.

The down side was the requirements: All Phantoms must have biotic abilities. This will allow them to move as fast as a SPARTAN with reflex armor upgrades without a Reactive Metal Crystal Layer.

The biotics would decrease their mass and allow them to react at amazing speeds, not to mention other abilities. Through augmentations and upgrades to their armor enhancing their biotics, PHANTOMS would have biotics stronger than any other soldier, even Biotic SPARTANS.

The Illusive Man moved the file aside, and simply lounged in his chair. The PHANTOM Initiative held great promise. They could be ONI's personal commandos, freeing him from having to borrow SPARTANS. The SPARTAN Program was officially moved under the regular military's control, so the only SPARTANS ONI still controlled were N7 agents who volunteered. This would free him from that restraint.

The problem was the biotics. They had only very limited success implanting biotics into soldiers. The only non-SPARTAN to successfully undergo the procedure was Miranda Lawson, and she was a genetic masterpiece. Fifty test subjects died before they could get the procedure to work without causing massive tumor outbreaks in the body, to such an extent that even modern science couldn't get rid of it.

Thankfully the SPARTANS made it out of the augmentations alive, but that was mostly due to gene selection. You need very specific genes if the implants are to work, and despite scouring the galaxy they still could only come up with a few subjects willing to be a SPARTAN. Biotic implants simply do not easily cooperate with the human body. Even gene therapy proved useless in the endeavor. A few BAaT subjects barely made it out alive. If this PHANTOM Program was going to work, they were going to have to find a way to boost biotic potential in humans and find a way to make the procedure safer.

Odds are that finding candidates for the program was not going to be easy. And it was probable that most wouldn't come willingly, which would mean kidnapping. And then, you would have to convince them to fight for you.

Another issue was gathering the element zero. The only known way of getting the substance was to use a powerful reactor, and it was very dangerous to even use.

It might not not be feasible. Then, The Illusive Man scrolled down and found another file.

Mind Control and Indoctrination

A brief report written by Dr. Eva Core was in the file.

As long as warfare has existed, there have been soldiers. Many will follow orders unconditionally, but some simply can't take it. They later develop PTSD or other mental diseases stemming from their traumatic experiences. This can harm any military unit. Another difficulty is spies. Many a war has been lost due to greed and treachery on the part of spies willing to trade their country's secrets.

Using mind control, all of these problems will disappear. With mind control, you could fill a soldier's mind with combat experience and tactical knowledge, turning each soldier into Alexander the Great within a day. You could give each soldier unbreakable will to fight, and even die if necessary. You could make sure no one ever spies on you.

While true mind control does not yet exist, techniques such as hypnosis lend credence to the theory that you could potentially hold complete control over another mind. Currently, the closest we have come to mind control is through a lengthy process known as Indoctrination. The subject is tortured, drugged, and filled with propaganda by skilled interrogators until they become subconsciously susceptible to post hypnotic suggestion. With their mind in such a confused state, they can be hypnotised to do virtually anything.

Most of our attempts have been on human test subjects, and so far we have had great success. We've managed to convince a few subjects that we've always been at war with the Sangheili. Others, we have managed to completely strip and replace their personality.

We have had limited success using captive Sangheili, but overall it is not as effective. It will be quite a while before we can indoctrinate Sangheili sleeper agents and plant them on Sanghelios.

The biggest problem with our current form of "mind control" is that it's a lengthy and often messy process. Some subjects have gone insane due to the process, and others have accidentally died during the torture phase. It also involves completely fracturing the subject's identity, which would be a major problem if you wanted to plant Sangheili sleeper agents. It takes months to properly indoctrinate an individual, not an efficient means of control.

Another form of control, though not quite "mind control", is remotely controlled cybernetic implanting. The subject is implanted with cybernetics designed to seize motor control from the brain, allowing him to be "possessed" by whoever has the control. However, it is impractical for being used on infantry. It would be more efficient to just build robots.

With increased funding and resources, my team is confident that we can create a form of mind control that is easier to use and less messy.

The Illusive Man paused. There was a time when he would have been horrified at such a proposition, but that man died long ago. The man he used to be was no more. He had been replaced by the Illusive Man, the head of ONI.

He could not let nostalgia cloud his judgement. He was in charge of humanity's security, after all. Such technology could prove useful.

However, he would have to make sure no one knows of it. Others might get considered about ethics. Programs such as these always bent ethics anyway. The only reason Halsey got away with the SPARTAN program was that the UNSC needed SPARTANS to fight the Covenant. The PHANTOM Program and the CENTURION program were a go. He took a pin and signed his signature on the two digital documents. Resources would be available to help the project, including as much money as needed.

The Illusive Man waved all the digital documents away and swiveled his chair around, giving him full view out of his station's massive window. They were orbiting a majestic red star, a true marvel of the universe. He took another cigarette out and lit it, inhaling the calming smoke and then slowly releasing the smoke from his body.

A beeping red file suddenly appeared in front of him, interrupting his quiet moment. Although irritated, he did not let the disruption penetrate his aura of calmness.

The file was labeled URGENT and was an intelligence report. The Illusive Man tapped it and read it's contents. He began reading much more quickly when he realized what the report said.

He pushed the red file out of the way and pressed a button on the arm of his high-tech chair.

"Yes sir?", a female voice said over the intercom.

"Call an emergency conference with the other Admirals. Tell them to come to Arcturus Station ASAP.", the Illusive Man said with a slightly more urgent voice than usual.

"Yes sir.", the voice replied.

Jack ground the lingering flame of his cigarette out in an ash tray and threw it out. He then resumed his observation of the nearby star. A massive solar flare erupted from it.

A star suddenly heating up, becoming more and more volatile. What a fitting analogy for the current situation. This paradox of a war-yet-not-a-war is finally beginning to heat up. Let's hope we don't get cooked.

_**UNSC **__**Charlemagne**_

Admiral Anderson sat at his desk, reviewing different files and looking over the strategic resources the UNSC had available to deploy. It was his job to make sure all the UNSC resources were properly placed and secured, and to strategically place them throughout the galaxy.

This took a toll. Anderson hadn't slept in three days and had been drinking enough coffee to fill an ocean. As much as his body longed for sleep, the job needed to be done quickly. He was nearly finished with his task.

He wiped his bald forehead and then pulled up a holographic map of the galaxy. He pulled up an image of the newly terraformed Reach, the planet this ship was taking him to. Although Reach was no longer a major military base, it was one of the most populated human worlds and therefore a major target for the Sangheili. It was armed with the most expensive defensive weapon available—a planetary shield and orbital defense platforms. He made sure a new company of SPARTANs would reach it soon.

The ship would hopefully arrive soon, then he could inspect the orbital defense platforms himself. Aside from Corvettes and Frigates, most UNSC ships looked like giant elongated turtles with a huge gun running down it. This look had grown as iconic as the Sangheili's smoother style. At the very least it would get him going where he needed to go.

Next on the agenda was the protection of the UNSC's most powerful strategic weapon: The ISNM, also known as the Interstellar Nuclear Missile System. Each missile was equipped with a slipspace drive, allowing it to travel vast distances without a warship. It was designed to conceal radiation, making it nearly undetectable until it was too late. The biggest, and most important part of the missile system was its NOVA warhead.

NOVA bombs had been around since the war, but it wasn't until after Humanity had rebuilt that they began being mass produced. The NOVA bomb was the most powerful weapon ever built by the UNSC, strong enough to blow a planet apart. They were the principle weapon in the UNSC's Planet Cracking Doctrine. Planet Cracking was developed after the war as a counterpart to the Sangheili glassing. If the Sangheili were going to burn a human world to the ground from orbit, then the UNSC was going to turn one of theirs into an asteroid field.

Only a handful of people knew where the stockpile was. Hackett, Anderson, and Jack Harper. The people running the facility were sworn to secrecy. They were all being stored on the moon of Torfan, an easily defensible position that was a good hiding place. Torfan hadn't been inhabited in years, not since the Insurrectionists had been wiped out by Shepard. It was the perfect place to hide the NOVAs.

ONI Intelligence suggests that the Sangheili had also been working on a superweapon of their own. A spy satellite accidentally observed its weapon testing on an uninhabited planet. It appeared to be a bomb that could be sent through slipspace to a target, then detonated in a massive plasma explosion that could glass a good portion of a planet.

This had been a worrying discovery, since it meant that going to war could cause mutually assured destruction. Sure, Earth and some of the more important colonies had planetary shields that could protect against a plasma bomb, but the vast majority of human worlds could easily be

destroyed by such a weapon.

Supplies needed to be delivered, as well as more materials for manufacturing. Anderson ordered supply ships to begin their journey to Torfan.

Anderson, barely awake, rose from his desk. He finally had time to sleep. He began to walk outside into the dull gray hallway of the ship, intending to go to his quarters and rest his heavy

eyes.

Just as he got a foot out the door, a beep on the intercom came through. Anderson, dead tired but committed to his duty turned and answered.

"What is it?", Anderson said with irritation. He was so close to a good night's sleep, only to be yanked back into his office. His office was like one of the pitcher plants back on Earth. Once you climbed in, you could never get out.

"Sir, this file is marked urgent from ONI. I'm transferring it to your computer.", the voice said. It was probably the ship's AI, but he was too tired to care enough to notice.

Anderson sat back down in his chair and pulled up the file. Someone was going to feel his wrath if this was not important.

He opened the file, and with one look he was suddenly more awake than he had ever been in his entire life.

He slammed the intercom button and called the bridge. He didn't wait for anyone to answer.

"Turn this ship around and head for Arcturus Station! Right now!", shouted Anderson.

"Yes sir.", the Captain responded.

The ship dropped out of slipspace and turned so tightly that it almost seemed like it would be ripped in half. Then, the slipspace drive reengaged and the ship once again soared through slipstream space, this time going to Arcturus.

* * *

><p>Arcturus Station_

The tension inside Arcturus's Admiral Meeting Room was so thick you could slice through it with a knife. Admirals Hackett, Anderson, and Kahoku were standing in their Alliance Blue uniforms, and the Illusive Man was with them as well. They all stood around a holographic table, looking at the situation around the Mass Relay.

"I assume you've all heard the situation.", Jack Harper said. He had been chain smoking cigarettes since he arrived on the station.

The others nodded.

"The Sangheili have blockaded the Mass Relay, trapping Shepard on the other side. It looks like it's Haer'Vhokuree's fleet.", said Hackett. His sharp, grizzled features were accented by a seemingly permanent layer of stubble.

"This is bad. Haer represents the radical faction among the Sangheili. I doubt he would hesitate to blow our ships out of the sky.", Anderson said while leaning on the edges of the holotable.

The Illusive Man shook his head. They were right. Haer controlled the biggest fleet the Sangheili had. His capitol ship was a massive CSS Battlecruiser with an energy projector powerful enough to singlehandedly glass a planet. If it came down to a fight, it would be a bloodbath.

"Our psych profile says his allies will restrain him.", The Illusive Man said.

Admiral Kahoku stared at the Illusive Man with a blank expression on his face. It was well known that he was a detractor of ONI and it's director. He was dark skinned and had a gray beard. He wore a hat similar to the one Admiral Hackett wore.

"Another brilliant piece of work by ONI.", Kahoku said sarcastically.

The insult seemed to slide off the Illusive Man, who managed to maintain his usual high class demeanor despite the situation.

"If we wait, his allies will restrain him. He'll listen to Alei'Lunjassee, as we observed during our meeting with him. Alei favors peace.", Jack said.

"You forget that Haer also has the largest fleet the Sangheili has available. What if he's getting tired of being under his allies' thumb? If he breaks this treaty and gets away with it, he'll get more aggressive. It's not a big leap to go from blockading the relay to slowly conquering small human outer colonies. Look at the history books. You can't appease the enemy, they'll only see it as a sign of weakness and then they'll press their advantage.", Admiral Kahoku said.

"No one said anything about appeasing them, Kahoku.", The Illusive Man said.

Kahoku shook his head.

"We wouldn't be here if you ONI spooks hadn't incited a civil war among the Sangheili. Thel could have stopped this. Instead, he died in a reckless war.", Kahoku said angrily.

The Illusive Man tensed up ever so slightly, so much that you would only notice if you were looking.

"Blame Parangosky and her crony, Serin. I was personally against the whole operation, despite her attempts to keep me out of the loop.", The Illusive Man said.

He remembered those days, back when Parangosky was in charge. The

days just before his covert coup'd etat.

Hackett stared at the holographic representation of the Mass Relay, thinking about his options. He was the one who would ultimately decide what course of action he would recommend to the President, and the President usually listened to him.

"What's our strategic situation?", Hackett said.

Anderson pulled up a map of the galaxy on a holotable.

"The majority of our ISNMs are not ready to launch, so I wouldn't recommend Sanghelios as our target. We could target Treyos, their most populated colony, but it would take virtually everything we've got to break through it's orbital defenses. However, it can be done.", Anderson said.

Hackett stared at the moon of Torfan as it was represented on the holotable, thinking about the WMDs stored there.

"We have people trapped on the other side. I'm going to give it 24 hours. If the other Kaidons do not convince him to call off the blockade, I'm going to send in a battlegroup to rattle their cage. Until then, I want the military at high alert and I want our ISNMs pointed at the Sangheili. Get the rest of our NOVAS ready as well. If they make any further aggressive moves, start cracking planets. Dismissed.", Hackett said.

Everyone in the room had fought the Covenant. They remembered what it was like to look at the enemy, and realize that after the fight was over only one of them was going to be alive.

For the first time in years, that feeling had come back. For the Admirals, this time not only their lives were at stake, but all of human civilization. Going to war was something no one wanted to do.

All the Admirals viewed it differently.

Hackett and Anderson didn't want war, but would defend humanity if they had to.

Kahoku didn't care. If two humans survive and only one Sangheili survive at the end, Humanity still won.

The Illusive Man saw an opportunity...

Nonetheless, this could be the beginning of a massive war between humanity and the Sangheili.

Would this be the start of the end? Was the galaxy going to die in a flurry of nuclear explosions and plasma bombs?

That would depend on the men who stood in this room.

* * *

><p>Author's Note

Sorry this one took so long, but it should be new and improved thanks

to Octo8 who was willing to beta read it for me. As you can see, things are beginning to heat up. Sorry for leaving you on a cliffhanger, but I wanted to raise suspense. Stick around for the next chapter because something major is going to happen. Probably.

Yes, this is essentially the Cuban Missile Crisis. Every cold war has one, right? I also threw in a Glasslands-style opening quote. Tell me if you like it.

Anyways, see you next time.

12. Pandora's Box

****Disclaimer: I do not own Mass Effect or Halo****

* * *

><p>Citizens of the Systems Alliance, our President's untimely death will not weaken our resolve. As your new President, I promise to uphold the same human values we all stand for. The Systems Alliance will continue to protect humanity from every threat, and ensure that humans are the dominant force in the galaxy. Remember this: Divided, humanity is weak, but united we are strong.-Excerpt from President Leah Brighton's inaugural address.

**December 4th, 2565**

**4:30 Galactic Standard Time**

**Arcturus Station Cabinet Meeting Room**

President Leah Brighton took another sip of black, caffeine filled coffee. Her crimson red hair was a mess and her eyes were heavy with stress. The former vice president had been awake for hours since the news of the President's untimely death. After her emergency inauguration, she was rushed from her campaign speech on Earth to Arcturus Station. It had been an election year, and she was busy gathering votes. That is, until she was informed the President's shuttle somehow had a mysterious slipspace malfunction. Concerned that it was an assassination due to the circumstances of death, they put her under armed guard and began investigating. She was next in the Alliance's chain of command, so it was vital that she stay safe.

They couldn't stop her from giving a speech to the people, however brief it was. It was a risk, but the people needed to know that they still had a strong leader. Without that, the Alliance was just a bunch of bickering politicians. That wasn't going to solve anything.

People often liked to portray the Alliance as some kind of grand institution of promoting the common good. In reality, the Alliance was the post war answer to the unrest in the outer colonies. After the Blitz on the brand new Eridanus II's capitol, Elysium City, and the retaliation on Torfan, the government finally gave in and gave the outer colonies a greater voice.

The outer colonies were to have an equal voice in human politics, just like the Inner Colonies. As both a practical solution and symbolic gesture, Arcturus Station was built as this new Alliance's capitol and the new government became officially known as the Systems Alliance. This name reflected the colonies' power just as much as Earth's. That put an end to the unrest, at least in any official capacity. A few terrorist cells popped up here and there, but they were quickly vanquished.

The fear that such unrest could eventually surface again was one many inner colonies had. They were the most likely targets since they were the most wealthy. The Alliance needed a strong leader to hold it all together.

Fortunately for the Alliance, Leah Brighton was perfect for the role. Like the late President, she was highly charismatic and well equipped for the job. At only thirty two, she was fairly young to wield such tremendous power, but it couldn't be placed in better hands. She fought hard to get into politics, and now that she was the second President of the Systems Alliance, she wasn't going to go down easily.

Now, she had to use that power. Right now, two things were a priority. Number one was holding the government together. The Alliance was only three years old, and unless she could keep a strong central government together, it could become too disorganized to effectively govern humanity's growing empire. That would be a complete disaster, though the Terra Firma party would no doubt be happy with the System Alliance's decline. They were the least happy to hear that the UEG wasn't going to be in control of the human government across the galaxy. Keeping the wolves at bay and keeping the public calm was priority one.

Priority two was dealing with the existing crisis she had inherited from her predecessor. They were a breath away from another war with the Sangheili. As Commander and Chief of the Alliance's military, it was her responsibility to find a way to stop it. If she didn't, it could be the Great War all over again. That was the one fear every human had. Many people hadn't forgotten the horrifying glassings of Reach and parts of Africa. They wanted protection. That was the reason she called a meeting with the Admirals.

The others had not yet arrived, so she sipped her coffee patiently, letting the dark brew warm her body, and allowing the caffeine to stimulate her senses. She needed to be awake, and after hundreds of years, coffee was still the best at the job.

As she was taking a sip, the Admirals walked in and took a seat around the mahogany table. Anderson and Hackett were wearing the Alliance Blue uniform, a sign of commitment to the Alliance. They seemed like ageless gods of war, men who had seen a thousand battles without blinking. It was mildly intimidating to the young President, but she had worse things to fear at the moment.

The other new arrival to the room was the infamous Illusive Man, with his unsettling calm facial expression and his piercing cybernetic eyes. She had never seen him in person, or even met him. Even the late president rarely discussed him. For some reason, seeing the ONI director in person sent a chill down her spine. She didn't know why, but something inside her told her that the man was trouble.

She sat her cup of coffee on the table and began the meeting.

"We all know the President is dead, so skip the pleasantries. I need to know what is going on. We're at the brink of war with the Sangheili, and I want to know what happened.", she said sternly.

As vice president, there were many things kept from her. She was more or less there to win votes. Defense wasn't her domain. Now that she was in charge, she wanted to know what was going on.

The Admirals had a wary look on their face, unsure if they could trust the new head of state. However, their sense of duty overcame their doubt and they let her in on the secret. Hackett began.

"I suppose that you are aware of Commander Shepard's journey into another galaxy.", Hackett said.

Leah nodded.

"Everyone remembers that. It was painted on every vid screen in the Alliance. I remember the controversy around using another large Forerunner object. People were afraid it was going to be the Halo rings all over again.", she said.

"What you didn't know was what was on the other side.", Hackett said.

He tossed a small holographic projector about the size of a deck of cards onto the center of the table, and a picture of the Citadel and alien races of which the Normandy had taken pictures.

This startled the President, who remembered all too well humanity's horrifying past with aliens. She could not deny, however, that the idea that they had found more aliens was highly plausible. After all, out of all the stars out there it's likely that there is more intelligent life. It was inevitable that they would meet more. That didn't make the revelation any less scary.

"Have we made contact with them?", the President asked, still incredulous about the discovery of more alien life.

"Yes. However, you need not fear them. They are very weak compared to us and they have no way of reaching this galaxy as they are unaware that the transgalactic relay exists.", The Illusive Man said.

That eased the President's fears somewhat, but the cultural antialien suspicion was impossible to remove entirely from her mind. Still, they were so weak human civilization wouldn't need to fear for it's life. It's always nice to know you have the military advantage. However, that raised another question.

"Why did we make contact at all?", she asked. It was a good question. If they didn't need them, why make contact at all?

"It was an accident, more or less. We would have left after first contact, but we saw an opportunity to gain an advantage in the arms race.", Anderson said.

The story just got more and more confusing as it went on. Why would

Shepard linger any longer than necessary? She read the report after the battle of Torfan. Shepard didn't strike her as one to put his team at risk unless he thought necessary. What did he find?

"And this opportunity is?"

"Territory. The Sangheili have a huge stigma against using large Forerunner artifacts. They tend to be more cautious around Forerunner artifacts than we do, mostly because they're afraid they're going to set off a Halo. We planned to use this against them by hiding military assets in the other galaxy. They would never look because they're too afraid to use the relay. We could potentially build an entire hidden fleet in the other galaxy, waiting to strike.

Currently, the Citadel government, as they like to be called, is fighting a war. As we mentioned before, their enemy is very weak. We determined that with our technological superiority, we could easily defeat their foe. The mission was to send ten frigates to reinforce Shepard, which is pretty much pocket change to us. Their enemy is a weak AI system that our AIs could easily tear apart if enough of them work together on the problem. Once we win their war, they will be indebted to us.", Anderson said.

That raised more questions than it answered.

"Why couldn't we simply covertly build facilities? That doesn't sound like a good reason to remain after making contact, and it certainly doesn't sound like a valid reason to go to war.", she said.

"You are correct, under other circumstances we would leave. However, doing this achieves three things. First, it will show them first hand how advanced we are and how powerful we are without damaging them. This will discourage them from seeking conflict with us. Second, we could gain their cooperation should there come a time when we need it. It is better to have many options available than to only have one.", the Illusive Man said, holding something back.

"And the third?", the President asked, eager to know the full story.

"The Mass Effect.", The Illusive Man said.

"The what?", asked a puzzled President.

The Illusive Man indulged her curiosity.

"It's what the Forerunner object uses to send objects such huge distances. Using the substance element zero, it manipulates the mass of the object. This has huge implications, and is the third reason we need peaceful relations with the aliens. They have been using the mass effect for centuries if Shepard's intelligence is right. Their scientific expertise on the matter will greatly advance our understanding. Mass Effect technology could be of great use to us. I didn't want to waste the opportunity.", The Illusive Man finished.

The President took another sip of the rich coffee and thought about the information just given to her. She didn't like the idea of a covert war. All wars come at a cost, and while they were certainly

capable of keeping it under wraps, she didn't like sending people into conflict.

On the other hand, anything that could give them an advantage over the Sangheili was worth it. Many more lives would be lost if war came with them. If war came she wanted humans to win, and this time she wanted to do so without destroying human colonies.

She thought it over. If the battle is mostly cyberwarfare, they didn't really have anything to lose, did they? After all, human computer technology was the most advanced in the galaxy. What did they have to lose?

She sat her coffee down and began.

"So, Commander Shepard is trapped in another galaxy, and about to go to war without proper reinforcements. Today just gets worse and worse. Okay, if it comes to war with the Sangheili, what's our strategic situation?", she asked. Her frustration over the situation was difficult to conceal among the Admirals.

Hackett changed the holographic projector's image to a map of the galaxy. A few systems were highlighted red.

"Every system highlighted here is a system we believe the Sangheili will target with their new weapon. Intelligence indicates that the bomb is not as destructive as our NOVA bomb, but it is capable of glassing unshielded planets and weakening planetary defenses. Our best guess is that they're going to try and hit the outer colonies which have little to no orbital defense. They wouldn't deal much damage militarily, but the shock value would make up for it. Alternatively, they could use them to try and soften the Inner Colonies' defenses, but I don't see that happening.", Hackett said.

"Why not?", asked the President.

"They don't have enough, and the bomb isn't an effective space weapon. We estimate that they have no more than fifty or so bombs, and it would take most of those to break through the Inner Colonies' planetary shields, assuming they somehow escaped the point defenses of the orbital defense platforms in the first place. They wouldn't risk it. Not to mention the fact that the bomb works by igniting a planet's atmosphere. It wouldn't be as effective in space.", The Illusive Man answered.

"Besides, the first battle would probably be around the Mass Relay. Admiral Kahoku is with the First Fleet as we speak. They're ready to jump into battle at a moment's notice. If it comes to war, we have enough NOVA bombs to turn at least a few planets in Sangheili space into a giant asteroid field. Our problem is deploying them. We've only been able to construct twenty ISNMs. That's more than enough to obliterate several Sangheili worlds, but the Sangheili are legendary for their point defense. If anyone can stop those nukes from going off, it would be them. We have to make our shots count.", Admiral Hackett said.

"What's your recommendation?", she asked. War was not her expertise, and she had hoped it would never have to be. That was wishful thinking.

"We should split our missiles. Use ten on military targets, five on Sangheili colonies, and five to soften up Sanghelios's defenses for when we attack. We 'll never get through to Sanghelios itself without them. If we can't do that, this will be a long, bloody war.", Hackett said.

That wasn't a very comforting thought. If it came to war, many lives would be lost. She couldn't bear to think of another Great War. No, this had to end peacefully. Too much was at stake. She wouldn't send brave men and women to their deaths unless she absolutely had to do so. That would be lives wasted. The whole thing seemed like the galaxy's sick joke on humanity. Leah had always wanted to be a politician, but she had never thought that she would be the one in charge of stopping a war. She needed a diplomatic solution, and to do that she needed an expert on the Sangheili.

"Mary.", the President said.

A stunning blue hologram of a young woman appeared in a nearby holotank. She wasn't life size, she was was a cognitive impression model AI, not one of the new Brain Scan Data class AIs. It was easy to tell the difference. Most cogimpression AIs choose to look human, while BSD AIs usually choose some kind of shape as their avatar. Her hair was long and straight, and she was clothed in a modern business suit. Just another reminder of where they were. On Arcturus Station, even the AIs wear suits.

"Yes Madam President?", the AI said with enthusiasm.

"Call Phillips up here. We need his expertise.", she answered.

In a few moments, the Professor walked into the cabinet room. He was wearing a suit and tie. He seemed older than he really was, his hair a salt and pepper color. It was mostly black, but patches of gray were showing up here and there. Coming within an inch of death on an alien world will do that to a man. He was indeed the legendary Professor Evan Phillips of Kilo-Five, ready to offer his expertise at the drop of a hat. He was smiling until he realized the Admirals were also in the room. Then his expression changed to something that looked like suppressed anger and a frown.

The Admirals adopted a very cold expression, cold enough to feel as if the temperature in the room had dropped several degrees. That is, except for The Illusive Man, who somehow had the same calm expression he always carried. It was beginning to creep Leah out.

As for their differences, the President wasn't surprised, given their history. Kilo-Five was a name that lived in infamy among the Admirals at UNSC High Command. It was for good reason, too. One could argue that Parangosky and her crack team of ODSTs, one failed SPARTAN II, one real SPARTAN II, pilot, and anthropology Professor of all people messed everything up in the first place. They essentially made a mess that everyone else was trying to deal with. That much even the lowly Vice President knew. Now that she was the President, the rift seemed not only more apparent but also wider. Power truly does change one's perspective.

However, now it was important that she used that power to hold everyone together. If the government becomes divided, it would fail.

The same goes for the military.

Dr. Phillips took a seat at the table, choosing the chair that seperated him from the Admirals the most.

With everyone present, she began.

"I know you don't get along well. However, now is not the time for petty bickering. We're faced with another Great War if we can't stop this. We need to work together. Admirals, you have military expertise. Dr. Phillips, you have Sangheili expertise. I need you to combine them to find a solution to this problem. Put aside your differences., or we're all going to pay for it.", she said sternly.

The message seemed to get across, though she could tell they were only willing to comply reluctantly. If it took a crisis of this scale to get them to cooperate, something would have to be done. However, that was a problem for a later date.

"Now that that is out of the way, I need to know who I'm dealing with. What can you tell me?", the President asked.

Dr. Phillips adjusted his pinstripe tie before answering, getting back into his anthropology Professor days. Those who did not hold him in contempt joked that he was the most interesting man in the world. If you were high enough in the intelligence or the military community, you knew who Kilo Five was.

He enjoyed the group quite a bit, but all good things come to an end. Especially when the Illusive Man is in charge.

After the dust settled, he was moved to work at Arcturus Station as an advisor on Sangheili society. That is what brought him here.

"The Sangheili are basically a feudal society, so whoever has the most resources holds the most power. If Admiral Harper's intel is correct, then Haer holds the power in this situation since he has the most powerful military. His allies could stop him, but I don't think they will. Their civil war is still fresh on their mind, and they won't risk another internal conflict. The only way I see this ending peacefully for us is if we give the other states a reason to oppose Vhokur. Otherwise, they'll just appease him and hope we don't go to war.", he said.

That made the situation much worse. The Alliance had absolutely zero leverage against the other Sangheili states. They would need something very good if it was going to convince the other states to oppose Vhokur. However, they couldn't quit. It was either this, or remain in deadlock. If they remained in deadlock, they might not be at war, but they would always be an incident away from war. They couldn't fail. They had to succeed.

"How are we going to do that? We don't have leverage against them like last time we met. Intel suggests that the hunger crisis has been resolved.", Admiral Hackett said.

Dr. Phillips leaned back in his chair.

"There is another alternative."

"Oh?", the President said.

"We could abandon the Mass Relay and leave Shepard behind.", Dr. Phillips said.

Anderson looked like he wanted to toss the professor out of an airlock.

"Enough of that! Commander Shepard is a hero, and I intend to make sure he and his team come home.", Anderson shouted. The other Admirals nodded in agreement.

The President sighed. It would be one life for the many, but if she started doing that, where would it stop? If she could get him back, she had to do so. What is saving humanity if you have to sacrifice it's soul?

"No. We're going to find another way. We can do this, it will just be more difficult. We don't have time to waste. Let's get to work.", said the President.

The others began thinking of solutions, but the only thing Leah could think of was hundreds of glassed planets and nuclear explosions. She always dreamed of becoming President of a nation. Too late did she realize her dream was a nightmare.

* * *

><p>December 4th, 2565_

**5:00 PM Galactic Standard Time**

**Mass Relay**

Admiral Kahoku sat at his desk aboard the UNSC Hood, one of the UNSC's most iconic ships. He had chosen it as his personal flagship, and it was a fine ship. It was named after the famous Lord Hood himself, rest his soul. When the news of the man's death broke, many people threatened to sue the news companies for false reporting. No one could believe the legendary Lord Hood had died. When people finally accepted the truth, they had the UNSC Hood built in his honor.

Kahoku had thought it was a miracle that Hackett had managed to fill the giant's shoes, but Hackett was a powerful personality in his own right. If the unthinkable happened, no one was trusted more than Hackett to see humanity through. There was something about his face that made you believe him when he says he will protect humanity. Beneath the man's war worn features and unchanging layer of stubble, there was something in his stern but calm expression that made you trust him.

Kahoku, on the other hand, was much less conservative than Hackett. While Hackett climbed the latter by charming people onto his side, Kahoku gained his power through sheer determination. Anyone who knew Kahoku knew there were two things he hated.

The first was aliens. He saw too much destruction by them to ever let go of his rage. The anger in him said that the Sangheili deserved to have their worlds destroyed as a karmic punishment for their hand in

the glassing of human worlds. The military officer side of him said that his job was to protect humanity, not avenge it. Sometimes he wondered which side was going to win.

The second thing he hated was ONI. They consistently threatened the safety of the human race with their reckless stunts. Worse, they always had an agenda. And they were nearly untouchable. Organized crime should not be supported by the government, and that is what ONI was: Government sanctioned organized crime. His hate wasn't out of moral obligation so much as it was the mess they made. They put UNSC troops in needless danger. That was what he was working on at the moment. A group of marines mysteriously disappeared while on a scouting mission on the planet Akuze. It was only a small outer colony and was still being terraformed, so it was a routine scout mission. That is, until the marines went missing. Another team was sent to investigate. Their bodies were found later, filled with needle marks.

ONI had to be involved. No one was supposed to notice the soldiers go missing, but they did. If he could prove ONI involvement, it would be very bad for the Illusive Man. They were nearly untouchable, but not completely untouchable.

That would have to wait for a little while. For now, he had to manage the first fleet. The First Fleet was humanity's largest fleet, and always the first to see action. Under normal circumstances it would have been under the command of another Admiral, but Hackett thought that someone from HIGHCOM was needed to oversee the situation.

As Admiral of the 5th Fleet and one of the top tier Admirals in HIGHCOM, Hackett's word had managed to get Kahoku appointed temporary Admiral of the First Fleet. Why he had been appointed Kahoku did not know, but it was most likely because Hackett was needed at Arcturus and Anderson was better at logistics and strategic resource management than he was.

Kahoku stroked his gray beard and rose from his desk, and then exited his office.

After a walk across the grated metal floor the Hood had installed and a quick elevator ride, he arrived at the bridge, also known as the CIC.

His first sight was Captain Ray Carson, sitting in his command chair and watching the video screens providing a view of the space outside the ship. After the war, human ships decided moving the bridge to the center of the ship was better, securing it from damage. This meant cameras were needed to see outside the ship.

Behind the chair was a hologram of the ship, indicating it's status. A holotank was nearby for the ship's AI.

Three other smaller desks with computers were in front of the view screen, meaning they were the bridge crew.

"Luke, how fast can we charge the energy projector if we need it?", asked the captain, referring to the Cruiser's main weapon mounted on the bow of the ship.

It was similar to the old Covenant version, but used less power. The

downside to this was that it was not as powerful as the Sangheili's version, which went further while still being potent enough to eat through a ship's shields with ease.

"The first time will take 20 minutes or so. After that, there will always be a little residual energy left in the power buffer. That should shorten the charge time for later shots. I've already started charging. Hopefully I can keep it half charged without overloading the energy buffer. Then we can fire more quickly.", the AI said. He took the form of a red cube.

"Thank you. That will be all.", Captain Carson said.

"Yes sir.", the AI said before his avatar vanished.

The Captain then noticed Kahoku's presence and saluted.

"Admiral on deck."

The rest of the crew followed suit.

"As you were.", Kahoku said.

The crew went back to manning their stations, but the Captain remained standing.

"Admiral Kahoku, what brings you to the bridge?", captain asked.

"Nothing in particular. It's been a while since I've stepped foot on a bridge. I thought I might take a look around. You seem to have everything in order.", Kahoku said.

He looked at the bridge crew, and noticed how young they were.

"They don't know how good they've got it, do they?", the Captain said, noticing the Admiral's observation of the bridge.

"No, they don't. The majority of time I had on the bridge was spent evading Covenant plasma. Those frigates were death traps. Not to mention all the times we prayed we were going to come out of slipspace alive, or not on the other side of the galaxy.", Kahoku said.

The Captain nodded.

"I remember that. Then again, you don't think of stuff like that when you know the next encounter you have with the Covenant could be your last. I'm glad those days are over.", Captain Carson said.

Kahoku nodded, but he knew those days could be back in a heartbeat if things went wrong here. The Covenant may have been dissolved, but the Sangheili were still a capable foe. The Jiralhanae were savages, incapable of doing anything significant on their own. Some were still serving the Sangheili, whether out of fear or loyalty he did not know. The Unggoy didn't know what to do without outside leadership since they had been under the thumb of the Covenant for so long. Most were on their homeworld, although quite a few remained with the Sangheili. The Kig Yar were pirates. No one knew for sure what happened to the San'shyuum, but they had obviously scattered. Kahoku

couldn't blame them. After what they pulled, the Sangheili would probably tear them limb from limb if they found them.

The ship's AI appeared once again on the bridge.

"Sir, the artifact is activating.", Luke said.

The news caught the commanding officers completely off guard. Shepard was supposed to call in before he came back. Something wasn't right.

"Luke, give me a view of the Relay. Figure out what is going on.", the Captain said with his arms crossed.

The view screen showed a picture of the mass relay. Out of nowhere a strange dark purple object suddenly appeared. It was a little smaller than a corvette. The object looked like a sinister clump of metal seaweed with a glowing core. Red arcs of energy seemed to emanate from its center. It looked as if it belonged under the sea, almost as if it were swimming in space.

Kahoku looked at the view screen, scrutinizing the object. It could be a trap, but if it wasn't it could be used against the Sangheili. If they could use it against the Sangheili, then it was also possible they could use it against the Alliance. That couldn't happen, not on his watch.

"We have to get that thing. If you can't, make sure the Sangheili don't get their hands on it. That order is to the entire fleet.", Kahoku said.

Luke opened up the Fleet's battlenet and transferred the orders fleetwide. Almost immediately, Longsword fighters took off.

* * *

><p>December 4th, 2565_

**5:06 PM Galactic Standard Time**

**SS Dreadnought Honor Unto The Ancestors**

Haer was still standing on his observation deck, staring at the relic. He didn't really like space. He may have been a Fleet Master, but it was only a title he gained by becoming Kaidon. Virtually every Kaidon held the title, despite only three Kaidons actually having ships to command. No, Haer lived for ground battle. He loved watching his enemies die in battle, not watching ships fall apart. He loved the dirt beneath his feet, lunging at his foe with an energy sword in hand. It was glorious.

In space, the battle high was not as great. However, all competent military strategists knew that wars are won in space, not on the ground. It was simpler to glass the planet and move on. Occasionally the objective would require ground assault, such as gaining intel on the enemy or capturing prototype weapons. The majority of the time, however, the objective was glassing. Modern ground combat usually revolved around disabling orbital weapons. Humans were well known for their mighty orbital defense platforms. Disabling them was always key to successfully taking a human planet, especially since they possess

energy projector technology.

He paused his muse for the time being to look once more at the relic. Nothing had happened. The massive object just floated there, suspended in space. Then, an object appeared out of nowhere.

His careful observation of the relic had payed off.

"Vengeance, open the Battlenet. I have new orders to give.", Haer said.

A figureless voice responded to his command.

"Yes sir.", the AI said.

A second later the Vhokur Battlenet was open and Haer's voice could be heard in every vessel.

"Bring me that relic. Dispatch Banshees and Seraphs, do what you have to but get it before the humans do. And make sure they don't get it.", he ordered.

The humans would not beat him this time.

* * *

><p>A dozen Seraph fighters and Longsword II fighters flew towards the mysterious object, each intending to haul it over to their side. No one wanted war, so the pilots were hesitant to arm their weapons.<p>

The Seraphs were faster than the Longsword II, but the Longswords had a head start. The ships maxed out the speed of their impulse drives. It looked as if the opposing fighters were on a collision course with each other, madly obsessed with reaching the object first.

When the tear drop shaped Seraphs realized that they weren't going to make it in time, one of them fired it's heavy plasma cannon and succeeded in breaking off one of the ominous object's "leaves".

The Longsword pilots could almost taste victory as they closed in on the object, readying their cables to tow it back to the fleet.

Their mad dash was put to an end by an ONI Prowler decloaking. It grabbed the mysterious object just a second before the Longswords reached it.

Then, the Prowler opened a slipspace window and vanished into the alternate dimension, it's destination unknown.

* * *

><p>Haer slammed his fist into the observation deck's window as he saw the human ship steal his prize. His Seraphs had been so close, only to have victory ripped away. How could he have not seen that coming? Haer backed away from the glass, and collected himself. He at least had piece of it. That was a small victory.<p>

"Excellency, we have the relic in the hangar. What would have us do with it?", a bodiless voice asked.

Judging from the lack of a body in the room, Haer assumed it was the ship's AI speaking. For whatever reason Vengeance preferred not having an avatar, to the frustration of it's Sangheili masters.

"Move it to the storage. I will examine it myself.", Haer said.

Haer then exited the observation deck and proceeded to the storage unit. He wanted to examine this artifact himself.

A few minutes later he arrived in the storage unit, where the large fragment of the relic resided. Four of his finest warriors were guarding it, and two scientists were studying it.

They noticed his entrance and stood at attention.

"Excellency, we are trying to figure out what the relic is.", one of the Sangheili said.

Haer grunted.

"Good. I want results."

Haer took a good look at the relic, and felt a mysterious force in the room. The relic was mesmerizing, almost hypnotic. Once Haer began looking, he found it difficult to turn away. It also was making some kind of noise. It was subtle, but it was there. Like white noise. It seemed omnipresent, almost as if it was inside his head.

Haer shook his head, trying to snap out of it. He had other things he needed to attend to at the moment. Observation of the relic could wait.

He looked at it one more time before getting ready to leave, but for some reason he did not want to do so. Haer thought it over one more time. He really didn't have that much to do, and he was Kaidon after all. No one was going to force him to do anything, and it's not as if he can't reschedule some of his tasks. Yes, that is exactly what he would do.

I suppose I can stay a while longer. After all, what harm could it do?

* * *

><p>Kahoku was furious. Was ONI so impatient that they could not wait to take the object until after his men had grabbed it? Instead, they had to rip it out of space and endanger his crew yet again. Once again, their reckless stunts almost got good, real soldiers killed. Then, the Admiral calmed himself. Being angry wasn't going to change anything.<p>

Kahoku knew from experience that anger without action was worthless. Fortunately, he had recourse. ONI had slipped up. They gave him Akuze. While ONI was nearly untouchable, they were not completely protected. If people saw that ONI was responsible for the deaths of those men, maybe he could conjure up enough outrage for an official investigation. Then the Illusive Man would get a taste of his own medicine.

First, however, he had to prove ONI was behind it. That would take some time, but this time he had a real chance, and he was going to take it.

In the meantime, he had the Sangheili to deal with. The Admiral sighed. One more thing on his plate. He needed to get back to his office, and he was crowding the bridge anyway.

"Continue watching the Sangheili. If anything happens, contact me.", Kahoku ordered.

Captain Carson nodded, acknowledging his orders.

Kahoku put his hands behind his back and exited the room, heading back towards his office.

He had much to do.

* * *

><p>Admiral Hackett calmly marched across Arcturus Station. The Illusive Man had not yet left for his private fortress, and he wanted to catch him. A few things needed to be discussed. After marching past one of the many statues of John 117 that covered the station, Hackett found the ONI Director. He was sitting on a couch, watching space through the window nearby. He held a small glass of alcohol in his hand, presumably scotch. Hackett had never seen someone drink so much yet always hold their liquor as he did the Illusive Man.<p>

Perhaps that stuff isn't real.

Hackett approached the Illusive Man, who already saw him coming. He most likely had a good idea as to why Hackett had found him as well.

"Hackett. Have a sit, I'll get you a drink.", the Illusive Man said.

Hackett gave him a piercing gaze.

"Save it Jack. Kahoku just informed me of the stunt you pulled at the Mass Relay. You could have gotten those pilots killed, or worse, you could have sparked a war with the Sangheili.", he said sternly.

The Illusive Man wasn't phased. Many had tried to chew him out in the past. They usually failed.

"Need I remind you that handling Forerunner and alien artifacts is a task reserved for ONI? Neither Kahoku or those pilots had the clearance necessary to even go near that object.", the Illusive Man countered.

Hackett frowned.

"About that. ONI isn't going to handle this alone. HIGHCOM is sending a scientist of it's own to study the device.", Hackett said forcefully.

"And what gives you the authority to do that?", the Illusive Man asked.

Hackett gave another piercing gaze to the ONI Director.

"I'm on a first name basis with the man in charge of the SPARTANs. All I need to do is pull a few strings and I can keep SPARTANs from joining N7. I've put up with your schemes long enough. While I may not be able to monitor everything you do, when it interferes with my people I'm going to do something about it. So you're either going to let our scientist in or you can say goodbye to any SPARTANs you may need.", Hackett threatened.

Although the Illusive Man didn't show any real emotion over the threat, he knew Hackett wasn't bluffing. The Phantom Initiative was still a long way away from seeing completion, and in the meantime he still needed access to the SPARTANs. He would have to accept, at least for the time being.

"Fine. Who do you want to send?", the Illusive Man said.

Hackett smiled.

* * *

><p>December 5th, 2565_

**7:00 Galactic Standard Time**

**Top Secret ONI Space Station**

Dr. Amanda Kenson wasn't sure what her old friend Steven Hackett had to do to get her here, but it was a nice change of pace from teaching at the university. It was high time she did some real studying again anyway. She had plenty of time to do so, since she was going to be on the space station for a while.

There were many things to get used to. The space station's layout was completely nonsensical for one, and ONI agents weren't the most friendly people in the galaxy. She understood, they probably didn't like people getting forced onto them. However, she could deal with it all if it gave her a chance to study a genuine alien artifact.

She walked through the white painted hallway and navigated the winding curves of the space station, hoping to make it to the primary study room and not get lost in the process. She finally reached the correct door and ran her fingers through her gray hair. She was getting old. Medical technology had extended the human lifespan by many years, but it could not stop gray hair.

She walked into the study room, which was a room that was wrapped around the chamber that held the artifact. She looked through a thick glass window at the artifact. The artifact was not covered in arcs of red electricity anymore, which could be due to the fact that part of it had broken off during it's recovery.

A man and woman wearing white lab jackets approached her.

"Hello, I'm Sara Heartman. You're Dr. Kenson, I presume?", the woman said. She had a dark skin complexion and her brown hair was up in a

bun.

"You presume correctly.", Dr. Kenson said.

The man shook hands with Dr. Kenson. He was wearing a friendly smile and had gray hair. He looked old, or at least older than she did.

"Welcome, Dr. Kenson. I've read one of your papers and found it very fascinating. I'm glad to have you on board for the project. My name is Dr. William Arthur Iqbal, but you can call me Will. I'm the lead scientist for the project. Grab a jacket and meet us in the artifact chamber.", he said in a friendly voice.

That was a nice change, given that everyone else was giving her the cold shoulder. She grabbed a white lab jacket and entered the artifact chamber with Dr. William and Dr. Heartman.

The doctors gazed at the artifact, drawn in by it's mind bending architecture. A very low sound seemed to fill the scientists' heads. It was omnipresent, yet so low that no one even thought about it. For a moment, Kenson thought about grabbing ear protection, but decided against it. The sound didn't seem damaging or particularly annoying. However, it was certainly worth an investigation. She would have to discuss it later with the others. In the meantime, she could take in the view.

"So this is it.", Dr. Kenson said, still in awe from the amazing sight.

"Yes, this is it. Magnificent, isn't it?", Dr. William said.

Despite seeing the strange device before, the device never ceased to amaze him. It held so many mysteries. Where did it come from? Who did it belong to? Was it Forerunner? What was it supposed to do? So many questions. Now, he could go to work on it. With the foremost experts on alien artifacts in the galaxy and the best equipment money could buy, he was ready to answer those questions. However it was still missing one thing.

"What are we going to call this artifact?", Dr. Will said, his eyes still staring at the alien object.

Dr. Kenson slowly stepped a little closer to the mysterious artifact, combing over it with her brown eyes. She stared directly at the dark purple mass in front of her and answered.

"We'll call it Object Rho."

* * *

><p>Author's Notes

I wonder if you guys can guess where this is going...

Hopefully I answered a few questions in this chapter. People have been asking what year this takes place in, so after researching the Halo timeline I figured that 2565 was a reasonable date. I also added in two Halo characters since people were asking about that, and you were right. I accidentally went a little heavy on the Mass Effect

side of things and neglected to bring in some Halo characters.

For those of you wondering "Hey, what happened to Commander Shepard?", we should be getting back to him shortly.

Also, I'm sorry that I update so slowly. I'm a very slow writer, but I try to get them out as quickly as I can. So, bear with me.

P.S. Thanks to all the people who have subscribed and given reviews. There are many fanfics on this site, so I have to say I'm grateful for your continued support.

Until next chapter!

13. Antibaar

****Disclaimer: I do not own Halo or Mass Effect.****

* * *

><p>Between ****Hinge****heads****, ****jackals****, ****brutes****, ****and ****who ****knows ****what ****else ****is ****out ****there****, ****it****'****s ****time ****humanity ****accepts ****that ****we ****can****'****t ****depend ****on ****anyone ****else ****in ****this ****universe ****and ****no ****one ****is ****going ****to ****help ****us ****when ****we ****fall****. ****We ****must ****rely ****on ****our ****own ****strength****, ****or ****we ****die****.- **Admiral Kahoku**

Time seemed to move at a snail's pace as Shepard sat silently in a private room on the Citadel's Tower sector. Garrus had been misinformed as to the arrival time of the military leaders, and as a result his stay had been prolonged. Shepard found the delay mildly annoying, but his personal feelings on the matter were overshadowed by a bigger problem. Admiral Hackett hadn't called in.

That wasn't a good sign. Unlike this galaxy's military, HIGHCOM was always on time, no matter what. The only reason they would be late is if something bigger and more important had happened, and that was a possibility he didn't want to entertain. His mission was one of the biggest operations the UNSC had pulled since Kilo-Five, so whatever kept them from calling had to be huge. War huge. Is that what happened? War with the Sangheili? It would explain everything.

Shepard could contact them himself, but he was only supposed to call in if there was an emergency or to inform HIGHCOM that he was coming back. Then again, they might need him if something had gone wrong. The Normandy was one of the most advanced warships in the UNSC's arsenal, only a little lower than the Infinity. They would need it to wage war against the Sangheili. It was decided then. If Admiral Hackett did not call in in two hours, he would risk it and call to make sure nothing was wrong.

Just as he finished deciding, EDI's avatar appeared in the top left hand corner of his helmet's HUD.

"Shepard, Admiral Hackett has called. I'm routing the call to your VISR.", EDI said.

Admiral Hackett appeared on his VISR. It appeared that he was in some kind of war room, with subordinates running about and talking with AIs. The Admiral himself looked tired. His iconic stubble had grown some, and his uniform was wrinkled from frequent use. However, his hat was in pristine condition as always.

"Shepard, I apologize for not checking in earlier, but we've had an emergency. The Sangheili have blockaded the Mass Relay. We aren't at war, thankfully, but we don't know how long it's going to stay that way. We're on high alert, but all our ships are occupied. Until the Sangheili move, we have no way to extract you. You're going to have to stay where you are until we can resolve this crisis. As you can probably guess, no reinforcements are coming due to this problem. You're on your own. I recommend that you abort the mission.", Hackett said.

Those words hit Shepard in the chest like a sledgehammer. He promised to defeat the aliens' enemy. His entire strategy banked on using multiple AIs to launch a cyber warfare campaign. EDI could maybe handle a battlefield, but she would never be able to cover enough ground to cover the entire galaxy. He would have to abort the mission.

...No. He couldn't. If he couldn't abort a mission when his closest comrades were killed on Torfan, he couldn't abort now. He had to find a way. To do anything else would be a dishonor to their memory. Not only that, this could be the biggest win in his career. He couldn't let this one get away.

"Sir, I believe I can still win this.", Shepard said.

Hackett sighed.

"Shepard, sometimes you need to learn when to give up. I think you should wait this one out, but I won't order you to abort. I'll leave those decisions to you. I am currently occupied with the situation on our side, so I won't be able to call in anytime soon. You have complete control over the operation. Hackett out.", the Admiral said. Then he disappeared.

Shepard leaned back and slumped his shoulders. This time, he really had bit off more than he could chew. He only had a short time before meeting with the military leaders, and he had no plan to defeat Saren. It was vital that he figure something out before he went in the meeting. The problem was he didn't have anything.

However, he could not be remembered as a liar. He promised that he would defeat Saren, and he was going to do it. No matter what stood in his way, he couldn't leave the mission incomplete. There had to be a way to beat Saren and his synthetic army.

That didn't change the fact that he only had one ship to do it.

Shepard sighed in a fruitless attempt to relieve the stress of the situation.

__What __have __you __gotten __yourself __into __this __time__,
__Jack__?__

He hadn't been in this much trouble since he was seventeen and figured out that he ripped off the mob by mistake. It was a miracle he got out of that one in one piece. Perhaps he could pull off a miracle again.

EDI appeared on his HUD once again.

"Shepard, the Pelican is on it's way. The team will arrive soon.", she said calmly.

Her avatar then left. She wasn't in his "head" so to speak. He didn't have her chip installed into his helmet. No, that was her transmitting her presence over slipspace. Kaidan was chosen to transport her to the Tower where she would physically join with Shepard's MJOLNIR, but her physical data chip wasn't available yet. There was usually no difference between the two, but having an AI installed in the armor helped with hand eye coordination.

Shepard thought about her reaction to Admiral Hackett's message. She no doubt was listening in. Nothing seemed to phase EDI, not even the sudden realization that they were stranded. That seemed somewhat unusual even for an AI. Shepard realized that it was more likely that she just couldn't express her feelings as well as cognitive impression AIs. That didn't make her any less powerful, though. There was no AI Shepard trusted more to bring on a mission.

_That__'__s __it__!_

Something clicked inside Shepard's head. The gears of his tactical mind began to turn. He called EDI, who was currently residing in Kaidan's MJOLNIR armor.

"EDI, I think I have a plan."

* * *

><p>Kaidan sat with the others on the Pelican. He had EDI's chip installed in his helmet, allowing her access to his neural implants and by extension his thoughts. Kaidan had an irresistible urge to scratch his head, only to find his helmet in the way. It was the first time he ever linked with an AI, and he was a little creeped out by the idea that an AI was casually looking around in his mind.<p>

EDI, on the other hand, enjoyed the experience. While she could not control her vessel as she could another piece of machinery, the experience was always enjoyable. Organic minds were always so chaotic. It was a nice change of pace to the easily predictable movements of machinery. Aside from her travels with Shepard, she didn't get to experience a merging very often, so she relished the experience.

Kaidan didn't know that, however. To him, she was just a computer program crawling around in his brain. He also didn't know what EDI was discussing with Shepard.

At least Ashley, Vega, and Miranda were there to keep him company during the unnerving experience.

_I __guess __Shepard __couldn't __keep __Miranda __up __in __her __office __any __longer__._, thought Kaidan.

Kaidan decided to strike up a conversation to keep his mind off EDI.

"So, do the aliens know of our presence?", asked Kaidan.

It was a reasonable question. As good as ONI was at covering it's tracks, you couldn't hide things like this mission forever. Eventually people begin to notice things that don't make sense. Once they start putting two and two together, they'll start uncovering the truth.

"No. We've managed to prevent other alien spacecraft from detecting the ship by cloaking, and we've limited our ground exposure. However, we won't be able to keep our presence a secret for much longer. You can wear your MJOLNIR armor and we can maybe pass it off as an advanced form of their combat hard suit, leading people to believe you're mercs. I, on the other hand, can't. Once they see my face, rumors will start to spread.", Miranda said.

Ashley leaned her head back on the wall of the Pelican. She knew that every minute of covert activity they could squeeze in was precious. The minute their presence was revealed to the galaxy at large was the minute hundreds of reporters came begging for an interview. Not only that, there had to be hundreds of scientists and engineers just dieing to take a look at their technology, such as slipspace drives. It was imperative they get their business on the Citadel out of the way as quickly as possible, or else they lose the element of surprise.

"Why does Commander Shepard want us to be there anyway? Granted that I haven't known him for long, but he seems like he can handle himself pretty well.", Ashley asked.

Miranda gave one of her condescending smiles.

"Ashley, the fact that you have to ask that question means you have much to learn about this business. The job isn't always about gunning down threats to the Alliance. Any soldier can do that. Sometimes it's important to manipulate others into doing something for you, or defusing a fight rather than start it. That's why Shepard is considered the best and that's why he was chosen for this mission. He's a miracle worker. He can turn a defeat into a victory. If Shepard needs us with him, it's not because he's lonely. He has a reason.", Miranda said.

"Docking Pelican now.", said the Pelican's AI in a calm female voice, ending the Pelican's trip.

The occupants felt the Pelican back into it's designated landing zone. The SPARTANs ran a last minute systems check to make sure everything was working correctly, and then the Pelican's doors opened.

Waiting for them outside were a few guards, consisting of Asari commandos and Turian C-SEC officers were there to greet them. The humans were immediately suspicious of their greeters. SPARTANs constantly subconsciously assessed possible threats in the

enviroment. They looked at the physical strength of the people around them, what if any weapons they were carrying, possible sniper perches, possible escape routes, cover, who to kill first if things go bad, ect. They didn't like the way things looked.

The only weapons the humans had at their immediate disposal were the three pistols the SPARTANs carried and Miranda and Kaidan's biotics. They had left their assault rifles and explosives in the ship. Their MJOLNIR armor and their cybernetics made them strong enough to kill the guards with their bare hands, and Miranda could make up for it with biotic strength. Overall, they had the advantage, but only if they could finish the fight quickly. Otherwise the aliens would call in reinforcements and they would eventually be overrun.

Hopefully such drastic measures wouldn't be necessary.

An Asari diplomat weaved her way through the guards and approached the humans. Her strangely humanesque face had a smile across it. She had a friendly demeanor that completely disarmed any tension there might have been prior to her appearance. White facial markings added flavor to her otherwise blue face.

"Welcome back to the Citadel. We will escort you to where Commander Shepard is waiting for you. Please follow me.", she said in a disarming tone.

The SPARTANs relaxed a little, but not by much. Miranda appeared as calm and smooth as she always was, but she too didn't completely drop her suspicions. Aliens were one thing that everyone was suspicious of, regardless which galaxy they came from.

They escorted the humans to a diplomatic shuttle to transport them to the Citadel Tower. Despite being unusually spacious for a shuttle, the SPARTANs could barely fit inside and Miranda had to squeeze in next to their Asari host. The diplomat's attempt to hide her discomfort about the situation was easily seen through, but the humans didn't blame her. She was sitting in front of three armored giants who could snap her like a twig. That was enough to make anyone uneasy.

The shuttle took off from it's dock and the C-SEC officers piled into several squad cars, intent on escorting the shuttle to the Citadel Tower at all costs.

* * *

><p>After a short drive the shuttle reached a dock at the Citadel Tower. The occupants of the shuttle were eager to leave it's unintentionally cramped space and stepped out as soon as the doors opened.<p>

Awaiting them in the tower was Commander Shepard in full armor, helmet at his side. Standing next to him was that alien he captured before.

"What took you so long?", Shepard asked.

It was more of a taunt than an expression of genuine annoyance or anger. The SPARTANs were pretty sure it was directed at Miranda. At least, that's what they hoped.

"Come with me, the meeting is about to start.", Shepard said.

The group entered further into the Citadel Tower and found that the floor they were on was completely empty. Not a soul was present, which must have taken quite a bit of doing to secure the area. However they did it, it was clear the aliens had as much to gain as Shepard did by maintaining secrecy. That, or Shepard managed to convince them of that. They probably explained away their previous meeting with the Council as well for the sake of security.

Shepard approached Kaidan while they were walking down the long hallway to the meeting room. While the aliens were distracted, Shepard signalled Kaidan with two fingers to give him EDI's chip. Kaidan happily complied, eager to get the AI out of his head. Shepard quickly put his helmet on and slipped the AI's chip inside.

After a few more minutes walk through the purple floored, red walled hallway, they reached a room. The door opened as the group of people walked inside, revealing a large white meeting room. There was a table in the middle, with two Turians of high rank on one side. They had several of what appeared to be elite bodyguards of some sort with them, each carrying an assault rifle like the one Garrus carried when he came to investigate the Normandy.

Garrus was with his military, and to Shepard's surprise Liara was present as well. He wondered about the wisdom of allowing her in on a talk like this, but it could have something to do with her mother.

The Human group decided to take their place on the other side of the table, after which their C-SEC guards left to stand guard outside.

Shepard stepped to the forefront of his group, with Miranda and Kaidan on his right and Ashley and Vega on his left.

"So, you're the Humans?", the center Turian general asked. He already knew the answer, of course.

Shepard turned took off his helmet and sat it on the table. He wanted them to see his face.

"Yes, we are the humans.", Shepard answered back sarcastically.

The turian glared ever so slightly. He then collected himself and began.

"Very well then. My name is General Adrien Victus of the Turian Hierarchy. I am incharge of a military task force sent to contain the Geth threat.", he said.

Shepard nodded in return.

"I am Commander Jack Shepard of the UNSC.", Shepard replied.

General Victus sized Shepard up, paying close attention to his powered armor. His allies were wearing the same, barring the one that looked like an Asari. Garrus told him of the things Shepard was able to do. Breaking a Krogan's bones with one swift kick was a very impressive feat, in addition to the gun he carried that could somehow

bypass kinetic barriers. General Orina told of how their ship had an advanced form of FTL, and how their entire ship could cloak both it's thermal signature and physical appearance.

The humans could be a valuable ally indeed, or a formidable foe. With luck, the latter scenario wouldn't happen.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Commander. We are always glad to have new allies, especially ones such as powerful as yourself. Beside me here is General Orina, the general in charge of the battlegroup that found you. You've already met Garrus, the Spectre in charge of hunting Saren. I heard you have also met Liara.", General Victus said.

Liara seemed a little shy, but considering the fact that she was in a room full of the most powerful people in the galaxy, she had a right to be.

Another alien came out from behind the guards. It had a female body shape, so the humans presumed it was female. She was wearing a purple enviro suit of some kind, with a mask covering her face. However, her eyes glowed so they could be seen. She had three fingered hands and three long-toed feet to match. It seemed like her head was wrapped in some kind of cloth, like the gypsies wore on Earth.

"This is Tali. She's been working with us as a Geth expert in our hunt for Saren.", Victus said.

Tali stepped forward so the humans could get a better look at her, but she had an ulterior motive. She wanted to see these humans. She had only heard about them a few hours ago, and she was already interested in them. They had technology like no one had ever seen. Not to mention they hadn't been indoctrinated by the Council's anti-Quarian racism. Maybe they would be willing to help her people. That would be the greatest pilgrimage gift ever presented. Others might bring home a beaten up old ship, but she would be bringing a true ally.

"Yes, I am the one who found the evidence that Saren was behind the Geth attacks. Ever since then I've been working with the Council task force to hunt down and stop Saren.", she said.

That seemed to pique Shepard's interest, if his raised eyebrows were any indication.

"Show me the evidence.", Shepard said in a direct manner.

Tali complied and pulled up her omnitool, selecting the audio recording.

"Camala was a major victory! The Beacon has brought us one step closer to finding the Conduit.", a voice Shepard presumed was Saren said.

"And one step closer to the return of the Reapers.", an adult female voice said. Shepard assumed it was Benezia, Liara's mother.

Shepard rubbed his chin for a moment, thinking over the evidence while everyone else waited. He finally spoke.

"First off, Camala was Saren's first strike, correct?", Shepard asked.

General Victus nodded in agreement.

"Camala is a Batarian mining colony, the wealthiest in their possession. Rumor is they dug up a Prothean Beacon, which is something our scientists are always looking for. They usually hold information on the Protheans, making them quite valuable. However, before the Council could twist the Batarians' arms enough to share it with the rest of the galaxy, Saren struck. He nuked the colony and fled. Normally we would let the Batarians handle this sort of thing on their own, but Camala is one of the galaxy's biggest element zero suppliers. We had to look into it. If Saren is trying to cripple the galaxy's infrastructure for an invasion, he's off to a good start.", General Victus said.

Garrus shook his head. He didn't agree with that assessment at all.

"No, he isn't about that. He doesn't want to invade, he's looking for the Conduit. It could be a superweapon, and if he finds it before we do we're screwed. Geth or otherwise, this is important to him. He wouldn't be roaming the galaxy looking for Prothean artifacts if it were otherwise.", Garrus argued.

Victus sighed. It was clear to Shepard the Turians had this argument before. He decided to let it play out for another minute or two before he stepped in. Something valuable could be gained from the argument.

"If that's the case, why is he nuking the planets he visits? This is an attack, not a hunt for some artifact. He wants conquer the galaxy with Geth. The Conduit is just to throw us off track from the real target.", General Orina said with her arms crossed.

They were about to go at it again when Shepard raised his hand, ordering them to stop. The bickering Turians stopped for a moment.

"Aren't you all forgetting something? What are these Reapers?", Shepard asked. It was a genuine question, and the one thing everyone else seemed to ignore.

Tali stepped up to answer his query.

"According to the memory core, the Reapers were a hyper-advanced machine race that existed fifty thousand years ago. The Reapers hunted the Protheans to total extinction, and then they vanished. At least that's what the Geth believe. Apparently we think differently.", Tali said while staring at the Generals.

General Orina gave Tali a look, and then turned to face Commander Shepard.

"The Reapers are nonsense. There is no proof to this claim whatsoever. It has to be propaganda to convince the Geth to fight for Saren.", General Orina said.

Shepard stared down at the table, letting his arms support his weight

as he thought everything over. He could tell the Generals were absolutely convinced that they were right, and Garrus was the same. He couldn't get a good read on Liara, although he got a feeling that she wanted to say something when General Orina pointed out the lack of evidence to support the Reaper claim.

Shepard pushed off from the table and stood on his own two feet.

"I'm not here to settle an argument over who the Reapers are or what Saren's motive is. I'm here to defeat him. Now, I'm going to show you how.", Shepard said.

He put his helmet back on, but you could see he had an unnerving smile on his face, the kind of smile he used when he was about to shake people up. He stretched out his hand that had a holoprojector installed and revealed a holographic sphere.

General Orina stared at it curiously, resisting the urge to touch it. Just as the General's face was close to the spherical hologram, EDI revealed herself.

"Hello.", she said.

Orina stumbled back and nearly had a heart attack. Everyone else in the room was stunned. VIs weren't capable of playful mischief like that. They were in the presence of a real AI.

"You use AI technology?", asked General Orina angrily while pointing her talon at Shepard.

"My name is EDI.", EDI said.

Everyone in the room seemed to be on the edge of their seat, except for Victus who seemed genuinely interested. Liara was caught off guard once again, but collected herself quickly. Shepard really was full of surprises.

Tali, on the other hand, looked like she was ready to punch someone. Shepard noticed, and smiled more. It was as if he liked antagonizing people.

"Are you insane! AIs are extremely dangerous! That happens to be what we're fighting right now!", Tali shouted.

"Just for that I'm going to make all the microwaves on the Citadel cook five seconds too long!", EDI said.

The nameless Turian guards' mouths gaped in horror, while General Victus face palmed at his soldiers' stupidity.

__They__'__re __great __fighters__, __but __they __sure __could __be __smarter__....__

Shepard glared at her, and EDI got the message.

"That was a joke."

Shepard looked back at the aliens, knowing their anti-AI attitude.

"Relax, everyone. EDI is friendly. She won't bite. Besides, she's not like the Geth. She's far more advanced than that. My kind has been at AI making for a very long time.", Shepard said.

It seemed to comfort their fears some, but the aliens still felt uneasy. Tali didn't look convinced. Shepard expected such a reaction from a Quarian, which is a shame. Quarians could have been a great and powerful race, but the Council buried them instead. With some modifications, perhaps they could be a useful ally. He would have to look into that.

"And how do you know she won't turn on you when she has to fight the Geth?", Tali asked.

EDI decided to respond to that one personally.

"I won't turn on Shepard or my crew because they are my friends. I won't turn on them just like they won't turn on each other.", EDI said.

That struck Tali as bizarre. She had never thought of an AI as having friends, and at least not with organics. How would that even work? She couldn't imagine stopping by to talk to her friend the computer on her way home. She was going to continue her rant when General Victus held up his arm and ordered her to stop.

"Okay, a friendly AI. This is good.", General Victus said.

General Orina stared at him as if he were a heretic.

"Excuse me?", she said incredulously.

General Victus just stared back.

"Oh come now, admit it Orina. This could be the advantage we need. We can fight them on multiple fronts now. I'm just as suspicious as you are, but we're at war. Sometimes you have to resort to desperate measures. Unless you can come up with a better plan.", he reasoned.

It was the truth. Victus was known for his willingness to resort to unorthodox tactics. As much as he was suspicious of AI, his suspicions were outweighed by his desperation. Saren was absolutely unstoppable. He may be targeting border colonies, but it wouldn't be long until he came after Palaven or Thessia. He had to be stopped, and if AI tech is how they had to beat him, then so be it.

General Orina wanted to continue, but considered it best to simply run with Victus for the time being. It would be best to avoid showing dissent among the Humans.

"How many of these AI's do you have? We could deploy them on the battlefields and gain an advantage while your ships destroy the Geth ships in orbit. We'll obliterate them.", Victus continued.

Shepard smiled at Victus. No one could see it for his helmet, but somehow Liara knew. She found it odd that she was picking up on the human's mannerisms faster than the others. She usually had horrible social skills.

"Just the one.", Shepard replied.

General Victus looked as if he was trying to determine if he was missing something.

"Then how are you going to do it? The Geth are everywhere, without more ships and AIs it would be pointless to deploy the AI.", Victus said.

__Unless __it __really __is __that __powerful__._, he didn't say.

EDI was a little irritated by the way he spoke as if she was just a piece of equipment, but his confusion was justified. EDI couldn't be everywhere at once. Thankfully, for every problem there was a solution.

"We have a way. Explain it to them, EDI.", Shepard said.

Everyone listened closely, especially Tali. If these humans had figured out a way to beat the Geth, she could tell the Flotilla. Talk about a pilgrimage gift...

EDI began her presentation.

"From the data I have gathered, the Geth transfer programs in and out of each machine. We plan to use this to spread a virus which will allow us to reprogram and take control of the Geth.", she said.

"That won't work. The Geth will notice the virus and download a backup, purging the virus from their system.", Tali said in an attempt to refute their plan.

EDI turned to face Tali directly.

"We're counting on it. The virus isn't designed to reprogram the Geth. It's designed to figure out where the Geth programs are coming from. It's a modified version of an ancient computer virus that was designed to pinpoint the location of a computer on a planet. This version does the same thing, except on a galactic scale. It will look for the largest, most powerful computer in the Geth network. When it finds it, it will covertly signal it's location to us. If we strike at this central location, we can reprogram the Geth faster than they can fight the change.", EDI explained.

Tali rubbed her hand against her chin, and was dumbfounded.

"That...could work. We've never had the technology to do something like that, but now that we do, it could work.", Tali said.

The revelation scared her. If that human abomination could somehow reprogram the Geth, then imagine what else it could do. The destruction it could bring to the galactic cyber infrastructure could be catastrophic. How could they even allow an AI in the room, let alone consider working with one?

"What happens if it turns out this central system is beyond the Perseus Veil? No one has gone beyond it and lived!", Tali

said.

"We'll go anyway.", Shepard said.

"That's a suicide mission!", Tali shouted.

Tali couldn't believe everyone was going along with this. Couldn't everyone see how insane this sounded? They were talking about charging into Geth territory! She had gone to some dangerous places in the past, even planets skirting the border of Geth space. However, this wasn't just dangerous. It was suicide.

"We're SPARTANs, Quarian. Where we come from, we're specifically designed for suicide missions.", Shepard said.

He knew that he hit a nerve. Tali was a Quarian, and from what he read Quarrians remained in their suits their whole life. No one ever saw their faces, and they never were really seen as an individual. The one thing someone who lives in a suit their whole life wants is to be recognized as an individual. Therefore, stripping them of what makes them an individual was a great way to get at them. Calling her "Quarian" instead of "Tali" was, for lack of a better word, dehumanizing.

It seemed to have worked, seeing as Tali moved towards the rear of the group. With her out of the way, he could get back to business.

Victus was suspicious of this plan. He had little doubt Shepard could pull it off. What worried him was that Shepard would have an army of Geth at his command once he did so. What if he didn't want to hand over the reigns?

"I will only agree to this plan if you surrender control of the Geth to us.", Victus said.

"Deal.", Shepard replied without a second's thought. He didn't need the Geth as long as he beat Saren.

"Okay then. Now we just have to find a place full of Geth to infect.", Garrus said.

Garrus was much of the same opinion as Victus. Desperate times called for desperate measures. If working with an AI was what it was going to take to take down Saren, so be it.

Shepard nodded.

"I think it's time to get started. My team will go back to our ship and start looking for a suitable target.", Shepard said. He closed his palm and EDI disappeared back into the digital world from which she came.

"Very well then. We will look for targets as well. Any resources you need, we will provide. Just tell us when you have control of the Geth, then we'll make Saren pay for the damage he's done to innocent lives.", General Victus said.

The human team turned to exit the meeting room, but before they could leave Garrus stepped forward.

"I'm coming with you.", he said.

Shepard thought the request over. As Garrus was in charge of stopping Saren, he had the most experience in the situation. He wouldn't have to be brought up to speed, nor would he need to be trained. Shepard knew there was no substitute for experience. If anything, that was what Garrus had, and that quality alone made him valuable. Garrus could be a useful ally. Shepard could vouch for his excellent marksmanship himself, he was a skilled technician according to his file, a good investigator, and most importantly, he was smart. If he were human he would have made a great N7 agent. His talents could be indispensable in the mission. He would allow his presence.

"Granted. Have whatever supplies you need delivered to the Normandy. Keep in mind everything will be checked, so don't try anything. We'll know.", Shepard said.

Garrus nodded, acknowledging Commander Shepard's terms. Tali then stepped forward.

"You should bring me along as well.", she said.

She had to come with him. If they had to use the AI, she was going to be there to make sure it didn't try anything. Despite her cultural hatred for artificial intelligence, she had to admit the humans were geniuses if they succeeded in making a truly stable AI. Perhaps some of their technology would make a good pilgrimage gift. Not to mention Shepard was a total bosht'et, and Garrus was going to need someone to watch his back.

"Denied.", Shepard said in a low, deep tone.

Hearing that word felt like she had just been shot. She couldn't allow him to leave her behind. She had to stay involved, somehow.

"Why? I'm about as close to an expert on the Geth as you can get, and I'm no pushover as an engineer. Give me some eezo, an old circuit board, and a power source and I'll have it moving faster than light. If you need me to fight, I've put down foes twice my size with a shotgun. Let me go with you.", Tali said with a hint of anger in her voice.

Shepard tinted his visor and stared her.

"I can't have you going on an anti-AI vendetta while on this mission. I need everyone focused on the objective, and you're not.", Shepard said.

His armor piercing words took Tali aback. In the end, however, he was right. She wasn't in it to beat Saren, she was in it to make sure "EDI" didn't destroy the galaxy. In a way, she also wanted to stick it to Shepard for insulting her.

How dare he!

Shepard just stared at her as she realized what he was talking about. He was about to leave when Garrus stepped in.

"Shepard, she really is as good as she says she is. She brought us the evidence against Saren. She could also be a good combat engineer. We need her.", the spectre said.

Shepard sighed. He didn't want to let in anyone who could compromise the mission, but he didn't want cause tension between him and Garrus. That would be just as bad, and he needed Garrus's expertise. He couldn't just tell him no. Garrus wasn't a SPARTAN. He hadn't sworn loyalty to Shepard yet, either. He would have to make this concession. Who knows, maybe she will actually be good.

"Alright, you're in. However, you take orders from me. If I say to do something, I expect you to do it. Understood?", he asked with that unnerving stare SPARTANs give with their tinted visors.

Tali nodded.

"Understood!", she said cheerfully.

Shepard surveyed the rest of the meeting room.

"If that's all, we'll be on our way. Oh, and Admiral Victus, we require a shipment of of eezo and some of your weapons.", Shepard said.

Admiral Victus looked confused. Why would soldiers as advanced as Shepard require less advanced weapons? It was a puzzling request, but he had agreed to supply them.

"Of course.", he responded.

Shepard nodded and exited the room. There was much to do, and little time to do it.

Garrus was the last to exit, but as he was about to walk out the door he felt Victus's hand on his shoulder.

"Make sure Shepard holds up his end of the deal.", he whispered.

Garrus nodded and exited the room.

* * *

><p>UNSC__**Normandy**_

Shepard stood in the engineering deck, looking at the ship's impressive slipspace drive and several other instruments he didn't know how to use. Several hours had passed since the meeting, and he had decided to come down here for a while. If the AI core was the brain of the ship, then Engineering was the heart. It was here Shepard decided to wait until Garrus and Tali had settled into their quarters. It also gave him time to think over the recent events that had occurred over the past few hours.

The necessary supplies had been delivered to the Normandy without incident, including the aliens' food supply. Thankfully neither of them had packed an obscene amount of clothes or luxury items, as that would have taken up too much space. It was a good sign they were disciplined, at least.

He knew that his human crew was none too happy about their presence, especially Miranda and Ashley. He would deal with those two later. Although he wouldn't tell the others, there was one more alien he would have liked to have on the ship. Dr. Mordin Solus, was his name. He was among the best scientists in the galaxy. He was even part of the Salarian STG, a formidable black ops group. It was the organization that established the Salarians' role as the espionage wing of the Council.

As much as Shepard would have liked to have him for the mission, Shepard's better judgement told him it was best for him to wait. HIGHCOM would want a scientist to come back with Shepard to help them study the mass effect. Mordin fit the bill perfectly. He couldn't risk his death on a potentially suicidal mission. After Saren was beaten, he would come back to get him. Until then, he had other things to worry about.

The fact that they were stranded was one he tried to keep out of his mind, since there was little he could do about it other than wait. That was a problem for diplomats, not soldiers. Hackett would tell him when the situation was solved.

Instead, he focused on other things. The shipment of element zero he requested had arrived, along with a few Avenger and Vindicator assault rifles. That would be of great use. Supplies such as those could come in handy, for there was another secret to the ship.

There was another reason Shepard didn't want Tali onboard. It was because he didn't really need her at all. He already had an engineer of his own. It was also the real reason he had traveled down into the Engineering deck.

Shepard walked over and opened a door, revealing a Huragok . The benign artificial creature was using it's many tentacles to manage the Normandy's instruments, making sure everything was working correctly. It was floating around through the use of it's balloon-like organs. It's fellow Huragok named it _Falls _Slower _Than _Usual_ due to the buoyancy it had.

The Huragok were perhaps the only alien race humanity accepted after the war, if only because they were docile to humans and were very useful. Humans treated them like favorite pets, although they usually worked with human engineers on construction projects and helped many companies design technology. They were widespread aboard military ships of all kinds.

They seemed to only have one goal in life, which was to fix things. This made sense, given that the Forerunners seem to have built them as biological supercomputers rather than true, sentient beings. It didn't stop people from treating them that way.

"Hey, Falls, I have something for you to look at.", Shepard typed on the notepad used to communicate with the creature. He then picked up the Avenger assault rifle he brought down with him and handed it to the engineer.

Falls Slower Than Usual turned around and took the assault rifle quickly from Shepard's hands, eager to have a new toy to play with. He always loved to upgrade things, which was far more interesting and

entertaining than making sure the engines work properly or making sure there are no malfunctions in the slipspace drive.

Using his tentacles, he took the assault rifle apart and put it back together a few times. It was as if he were a con man working a deck of cards. The Hugarok would be excellent at running shell games if the speed they take things apart and reassembled them were any indicator.

After repeating the disassembly/reassembly pattern a few times, it finally stopped, revealing a brand-new upgraded variation of the Avenger.

Shepard held it in his hands and could feel the power as he held it in his arms. He couldn't wait to try it out.

Falls Slower Than Most typed on his notepad.

"This is an interesting weapon. Where did you find it?", Falls asked.

Shepard put the gun down on a nearby table and responded.

"It was a gift."

Falls moved his tentacle across the haptic holographic keyboard at lightning speed.

"Do you have more?", it asked excitedly.

Shepard nodded and typed again.

"Yes. Thirty more.", Shepard said.

The Huragok looked as if it was going to explode with happiness.

It typed even quicker than usual.

"Can I see them?", it asked.

Shepard typed once more.

"Sure. I'll bring them down to you later.", Shepard said.

The Huragok spun around joyfully.

"Thank you.", Falls Slower Than Most said.

Shepard grabbed his new weapon and exited the Engineering Deck. It was time to test his new gun.

* * *

><p>A few minutes later and Shepard was in the VR simulator, carrying his new weapon. He fired it over and over again, getting a feel for it. So far it was proving to be a capable two-shot burst weapon, far superior to the Avenger. It hit with high velocity and it hit hard. Energy Shields were destroyed fairly easily, about as easily as the Plasma Battle Rifle could do. Kinetic Barriers were like paper when they went up against the punishing force of his new weapon.<p>

The weapon finally overheated, forcing Shepard to replace it's thermal clip. Falls Slower Than Most had adapted a plasma heat capacitor for the new weapon, providing another advantage. It absorbed the heat from the weapon. This allowed the weapon to fire longer without overheating. It was also one of the defining traits of human weaponry.

Human weapons were designed around sustained rate of fire while Sangheili weapons were designed around damage. As a result, most human weapons could be fired for longer periods of time.

Shepard took a break from his target practice. From the tests he had ran, the weapon hit nearly as hard as a plasma battle rifle but didn't overheat as quickly. Combine that with a heat capacitor and this weapon could have an even better sustained rate of fire. It was a great weapon. He was going to take it with him on the next mission, that's for sure. Now he just had to name it.

He looked at the rifle for a moment. Such a weapon could decide the fate of the men and women who wield it. It could be the difference between life and death.

__Valkyrie__. __That__'__s __what __I__'__ll __call __it__, __the __N__7 __Valkyrie__._

Yes, that was the perfect name. He slung his Valkyrie Rifle over his shoulder.

Shepard looked at the time.

__The __aliens __must __be __settled __in __by __now__. __Time __to __talk __to __them__._

He exited the VR training room and took the Valkyrie with him, placing it on a weapons rack to be taken to the armory on his way out.

* * *

><p>Garrus and Tali waited in the CIC, or Bridge as the humans called it. They had been called here a few minutes ago, not knowing why. Tali was worried she had done something wrong. She didn't want to feel the wrath of the armored giants known as humans. At least that one woman looked normal, but somehow she was the creepiest of them all. Especially her smile. It wasn't a friendly smile, it was more of an "I'm going to eat you when you aren't looking" smile. It creeped Tali out.<p>

Tali couldn't help but wonder if she had gotten in over her head. She was about to set off with a Spectre and a crazy new race of armored giants to stop a power hungry rogue spectre and his army of machines. Everything she said about her credentials was true, barring her exaggerated engineering skills. She had killed people before, and she was an excellent engineer. However, she wasn't a soldier. That made her the only person on the ship without military experience. Worse, she didn't even know what to expect from these "humans". At least she had Garrus. That was one thing familiar to her.

Commander Shepard walked into the Bridge, wearing his usual black and

red armor. That was another odd thing Tali noticed about these humans. They never seemed to take off their armor. They weren't like the Quarrians, who needed envirosuits to live. They could live outside of them and be just fine. Miranda was an example of such behavior. However, the majority of these humans seemed to wear their advanced armor all the time. Why would they do that when they could be free of them? Were they really so paranoid that they wear super advanced armor all the time?

Her muse was cut short by Shepard turning to address them.

"As you already know, I am Commander Shepard of the UNSC. This ship is called the Normandy. I need you to understand something: I run this ship military. Now, if you are going to be part of this ship's crew, I have a few rules for you to follow. Rule number one: If you have any questions, come ask me. I can't guarantee your safety otherwise. Rule number two: Don't go anywhere I say is off limits. Everything you see on this stays on this ship. If you start digging around classified materials or go looking for souvenirs, I'll have to kill you. I may eventually allow you access to more of the ship, but for now you are restricted to the crew deck and the Bridge. Engineering is off limits, as are weapon systems. You may only enter the hangar for missions and when I say you can. Now, if that's all cleared up, we'll get to work.", Shepard said.

Tali and Garrus nodded in agreement to Shepard's terms, although Garrus's nod was more military than Tali's.

Shepard accepted their response and put his hands behind his back.

"I don't suppose either of you have seen us jump to slipspace, have you? Garrus was here, but he was spending his time in the brig. I guess there is a first for everything.", Shepard said. He was wearing another one of those smiles...

"Um, sir, I have a question.", Tali said nervously.

"Yes Tali?", Shepard responded.

"What is slipspace exactly?", she asked.

Shepard was still wearing that psychopathic smile. Garrus had grown to recognize it, but Tali still had much to learn.

"Tali, in just a moment we are going to go from real space into an alternate dimension called slipspace, where the laws of physics do not exist as we know them and we can move faster than light without relativistic problems.", Shepard said cheerfully.

It wasn't against protocol to reveal the nature of slipspace, especially considering that these aliens would never figure out how to build a translight engine without Alliance help. Besides, it would be one less question the Quarian was going to pester him with on their mission.

"But isn't that dangerous?", she asked.

Shepard stared directly at her. He waited until her eyes locked with his, and at that exact moment he responded.

"Compared to your method of FTL? Extremely.", Shepard said with excitement. He then turned around and faced the Normandy's "cockpit".

"Get us out of here Joker.", Shepard said with enthusiasm.

"Aye Commander.", Joker replied.

A slipspace portal suddenly appeared, and the Normandy flew straight into it's black abyss. Tali decided this was a good opportunity to go to her quarters. She left the bridge and was careful to go exactly where Shepard said she could go.

* * *

><p>Tali sat on her bed, thinking about her situation. It wasn't until she started thinking it through did she realize she was in way over her head. Really, really in over her head. The humans were different than what she expected them to be like. She thought they would be a more advanced version of the Asari, a highly advanced and enlightened race. She thought they might be willing to listen to her people's problems and maybe help the Quarians take back Rannoch.<p>

After brief exposure to them, she realized that they weren't like that at all. The truth was that humans were absolutely insane. The majority of them wore powered armor all the time, as if they were expecting something to happen. They used AI, which was like playing with fire as her people knew all too well. Their method of FTL involved jumping into an alternate dimension where you could end up lost for eternity. They didn't like aliens, yet they ask to help defeat the galaxy's greatest foe free of charge. To top it all off, Commander Shepard talked about killing people as if he were deciding where he wanted to eat for dinner.

She was quite possibly the only normal person on this ship full of psychopaths. It was like the ancestors were punishing her for her willingness to overlook people's safety in order for her to gain something so petty as a pilgrimage gift.

__Keelah__, __what __have __I __gotten __myself __into __this __time__? __I__'__m __not __cut __out __for __this__! __I__'__m __on __a __pilgrimage__, __not __training __to __be __a __soldier__!_

It was too late now. She was already on the human ship, signed up to wage war against the Geth. There was no going back. At least she had Garrus.

Just as she thought that, her door opened and revealed the Turian Spectre himself, clad in his usual blue armor and his famous monocle.

"Oh, hey Garrus. I wasn't expecting you.", Tali said.

Garrus came in and sat down on a chair in the corner of her room.

"I came to check on you.", he said calmly.

Tali was unsure what to say to his kindness, so she stuck with her

usual return to such a question.

"I'm fine.", she replied.

Garrus tilted his head, calling her bluff

"Don't give me that. I saw how uncomfortable you were. While I like to call myself a ladies' man, I am the worst at picking up subtle cues. It was obvious that you don't feel comfortable.", he said in his Turian voice.

Tali wasn't expecting Garrus to go any further, another "subtle cue" he missed.

She leaned in closer and lowered her voice, as if she was trying to hide from the ship's omnipresent AI.

"Keelah, Garrus! Aren't you uncomfortable around these people? They talk about killing people so casually it's like talking about the weather! They even threatened to kill us if we didn't comply with their rules! Not to mention that AI. I can feel it's eyes on me. Humans are an insane race of psychopaths, and we're stuck on this ship with them.", she said in a whisper.

Garrus leaned back, contemplating her words. She was right in some aspects. The humans were pretty crazy. However, Shepard didn't seem like he was a bad guy. He even felt a kindred spirit in him. If Shepard was crazy, he was too. Besides, they were his best shot at stopping Saren from reaching the Conduit. It was a necessary risk.

"Look, I can see where you're coming from. Humans may sound like lunatics, but I'm fairly certain that if we stay out of their way they won't be against us. I think we can trust Shepard.", Garrus said.

Tali gave Garrus an armor piercing stare.

"And what happens when their interests are in conflict with ours? Do you really think they would hesitate to bring the full might of their power to bear against us? If they chose to launch a cyber attack against our infrastructure, we would be powerless to stop it. EDI is a very advanced AI. I know, because a normal VI or an AI like the Geth wouldn't be capable of creating personalities like that. And if they really do have the power to reprogram the Geth, imagine what they could do to us! Humans are dangerous, Garrus. We should be cautious, or else we could end up as their next victim.", Tali said.

Garrus shook his head. He couldn't worry about that yet. Saren was the priority. The humans could be trouble, but they could also wait. It then occurred to him that the humans hadn't shown them much. They never showed a fleet of their ships. They seemed to come from another galaxy, yet they wouldn't show where or how to get there. They never discussed their homeworld. They never talked about their superiors.

There was no question that the humans were advanced. Their FTL was very fast in comparison to Citadel species, they possessed effective energy weapons, and they had an AI, there had been no display of just

how advanced they were.

As a matter of fact, there was nothing to indicate there was such a thing as a human civilization at all. They simply showed up, kidnapped a Spectre, wowed everybody with FTL technology and advanced combat suits, and relied on shock. Everyone seemed to take their word for it. How did he know whether the humans were lying? How does he know if the humans can really do what they say they can? For all he knew, they could just be pirates who got lost and stumbled across a new civilization and decided to wow the natives with matches and fire. This whole thing could be a sham.

"I'll see you later.", Garrus said. He then got up from his chair and walked out. He had some investigating to do. Starting with Shepard, the supposed leader.

* * *

><p>When Garrus found Shepard, he was in the mess drinking the black brew humans called coffee. Even though Garrus couldn't drink it due to being a dextro, he couldn't stand the smell. For the way humans drank the stuff, it had to be better than it smelled. Much, much better.<p>

Garrus took a seat on the opposite side of the table Shepard was sitting at, so he could directly face the "Commander".

"So, has there been any word from Victus on suitable targets?", Garrus asked. It was a good way to start a conversation.

Shepard took another sip from his mug before sitting it down on the table.

"No. We dropped out of slipspace a while ago, and our scanners aren't picking up anything. We were hoping for a stray Geth transmission, but no such luck.", Shepard replied.

Garrus sat down at the table. There was no other way to do this other than to simply confront Shepard. He had to be direct. He had to be the cop he was before his life fell apart and he found himself hunting a war criminal.

Garrus reverted back to his cop days and gave Shepard an armor piercing stare.

"Alright Shepard, tell me what this is all about.", he asked.

Shepard stared back.

"Excuse me?", he said in return.

Garrus didn't let his stare down.

"Shepard, you came out of nowhere, kidnapped me, flew to the Citadel and wowed everyone with some fancy technology. Even me. Everyone believed what you said because of the shock factor, despite not having any evidence to support your claims. You say that you are going to beat Saren, the galaxy's toughest foe, with one ship. You also say you're going to reprogram the Geth, another tall order. What

other miracles can you perform?", Garrus asked.

Shepard gave an intimidating gaze back to him.

"Just what are you implying?", Shepard asked.

Garrus let the situation simmer for a moment, raising the tension in the empty mess hall.

"I think you're lying to us. I'm not sure about what yet. But I know you're hiding something.", Garrus said.

Shepard took another sip of his coffee.

"I'm not lying.", Shepard said.

He technically wasn't lying, it was just a half truth. Those were usually more effective than lies anyway. How to lie and manipulate was one of the first lessons taught at ONI, and since he was N7 he had learned the lesson as well. It was not one easily forgotten. Of all the amazing weapons and tools available to him, the most powerful was the ability to lie. A lie was the ultimate intangible weapon. It could turn brother against brother, make loyal patriots betray their nations, and convince paranoid scientists to hand over a useful piece of technology. The trick was to not get caught. That was difficult when being questioned by an ex-cop.

Garrus pressed on, determined to get the truth.

"Then why haven't we met your superiors? Where are the diplomats? Why haven't we received a single message from your political leaders? As far as we know, the only humans in existence are the ones on this ship. For all we know there isn't a mighty human civilization out there.", Garrus said.

Shepard took another sip of his coffee, not intimidated by Garrus.

"Sometimes, Garrus, you have to take a leap of faith. I can do what I say I can. Believe.", Shepard said.

Garrus got up and exited the room, going through the automatic doors and into the hallway.

Shepard sat his mug down once more. This wasn't good. Garrus wasn't going to stop looking until he got the truth, and Shepard doubted his 'leap of faith' line was going to stick. If his suspicions got off the ship, it could jeopardize the mission. He would have to think of a solution, and think of one quickly.

* * *

><p>Garrus sat in his quarters, thinking over things and piecing together the puzzle he had stumbled on. Right now, he was focused on Saren. He memorized the rogue Spectre's file and went over it in his mind over and over.<p>

Something puzzled him about it. It just didn't feel right. Saren supposedly had Matriarch Benezia and the Geth under his control, manipulated into serving him by using the Reapers. The problem was

that such behavior went completely against Saren's profile. Saren almost never resorted to manipulation in all his years as a Spectre. It just wasn't his MO. He preferred more direct methods, like torture.

Furthermore, the two groups under his command were extremely difficult to manipulate. According to Tali, the Geth couldn't be manipulated by logical means. They would have to be reprogrammed, something nigh impossible to do. Liara was adamant that her mother could not be so easily manipulated. She believed in helping the Asari get into galactic affairs, but she wasn't gullible. It would be very hard to manipulate her.

Saren himself was another difficult target. He was a loyal servant of the Council prior to his sudden betrayal. He had no motive for his actions either.

The logical conclusion was that there was another force at work, a man behind the man. Whoever it was had been completely hidden from galactic society. They also had to be excellent, skilled programmers with technology the galaxy had never seen before. In addition to that, they also had to be master manipulators, good enough to get Saren to betray the Council and Benezia to betray her principles.

Garrus's heart froze. He made a sudden realization: Humans fit all three criteria. They fit the profile perfectly. Shepard was able to manipulate everyone into giving him exactly what he wanted, and he also possessed the necessary technology to control the Geth. Is it possible he had somehow planned this whole thing? Was he the one behind Saren's betrayal? Was he responsible for Nihlus's death?

But why? What did he have to gain? Why would he fight against himself?

Garrus didn't want to think about it. There wasn't anything he could do anyway, not until he had solid evidence. Until then, he would have to continue with the mission and watch his back. Shepard might have him killed if he thought Garrus was onto him.

Garrus decided to go to sleep, getting into his bed and turning the overhead light off. He kept one eye open, ever aware that EDI was watching him.

It was going to be a restless sleep.

* * *

><p>A __**few **__**hours **__**later**__

Shepard stood in the bridge, watching a map of the galaxy and hoping one of his slipspace probes would get lucky. They had moved around several time in the last few hours, checking possible locations for Geth bases. It was surprising how difficult they were to find, given that they were invading the galaxy. So far he was avoiding Garden worlds as the people of this galaxy called them. The Geth were machines, they didn't require things like air and water to function. This made them all the harder to find, since they could be anywhere. They might be hiding in a space station, or underground on an inhospitable world. They were nearly impossible to find.

"Shepard, General Victus has sent a message.", EDI's bodiless voice said.

Shepard's prayers had been answered.

"Route it to the bridge, EDI.", Shepard ordered.

"Yes Commander.", she replied.

"Commander Shepard, we have found some Geth activity in the Nius Tor sector. You may find a suitable target for your virus there.", he said. The message then ended.

Shepard looked at his galaxy map and highlighted the Nius Tor sector where Victus suspected Geth activity. It looked like a good target. Once he got there he would start listening in, fishing for Geth transmissions. Hopefully they would bite.

"EDI, get everybody. Tell them to meet me in here.", Shepard said.

A few minutes later and everyone was in the bridge, which just happened to be spacious enough to fit everyone. The SPARTANs were in their MJOLNIR powered armor as always, and Miranda was in her usual jet black ONI uniform, complete with the all-seeing eye emblem. Tali was wearing her envirosuit and Garrus was wearing his usual blue armor. Shepard was fully armored as well.

"A few minutes ago Admiral Victus sent a message containing intelligence about possible Geth outpost in the Nius Tor cluster. We will be heading there shortly. Tali, you are to collaborate with EDI on the virus. Help make it more difficult for the Geth to notice. Once you're done with that, you are to join Garrus in the hangar.", Shepard said. He then looked at his SPARTANs.

"SPARTANs, you are to give our alien allies a crash course on how to use a Scorpion tank. Understood?", Shepard ordered.

The SPARTANs saluted.

"Yes sir!", they shouted.

Garrus noted the discipline these soldiers showed. They weren't pushovers or pirates. They were official. Someone had trained them, which meant these humans did belong to a command structure of some sort. Shepard alone couldn't have trained them alone. Nor could he have created all the technology at his disposal. Someone had to have supplied him.

"Good. Get started. I will inform you when we reach our destination. Dismissed.", Shepard said.

With those final orders, everyone left the bridge.

* * *

><p>Tali stood in the AI core, in the presence of the human AI. She usually felt at home around computers. Tinkering with them to make them go faster or make them more durable was one of her favorite hobbies. However, this was different. AIs weren't omnitools or VIs.

They were the most advanced form of computer in existence. It baffled her that humans had somehow mastered them, a feat that no one in Citadel space had achieved.<p>

Then again, no one has really tried., she reminded herself.

That was a thought for another time. Now, she had to help EDI by providing knowledge on the one subject she knew more about.

"Hello Tali. I am glad you are here. I could use your assistance in modifying the tracer virus. Here, take a look.", EDI said. She pulled up a holographic screen showing lines of computer code.

It looked exceptionally well written, although that probably wasn't difficult for an AI. Their entire world consisted of coding. Tali scanned over the virus line after line, paying attention to all the subtle pitfalls a Geth anti-virus purge would run into if it tried to delete it. The funny thing was that the virus itself was only one line long. The rest of it was just a defense mechanism designed to prevent a purge before the virus succeeded in it's task. It was like a virtual maze. The Geth would knock one door down only to find three more, leading them on a wild goose chase while the virus did it's job. Once the virus found the center of the Geth network, it would send a message to EDI telling her where it was. Then they could simply go find it.

It occurred to her that the center of the network could be behind the Perseus Veil. That was where the majority of the Geth lived, after all. That would be a suicide mission. No one had ever gone beyond the Veil and lived since the Geth Revolt. Who knows what the machines had been up to since they last met. She knew they somehow had constructed that massive dreadnought, and if they were capable of that she shuddered at the thought of what else they could do.

On the other hand, if anyone could succeed in such a mission it was the humans. They possessed the technology and the expertise to defeat the Geth, perhaps even on their home turf.

No, our home turf. The home the Geth took from us., she reminded herself.

Regardless, technology wise the humans had what it took to fight the Geth and win. They had already achieved Daro' Xen's dream: A way to control the Geth.

Admiral Xen would like these humans. They're as crazy as she is..

She hated admitting it, but the AI's virus was genius. If a Quarian had created such a virus, he or she would be given a monument on every ship in the fleet, and perhaps on the homeworld someday.

It also terrified her. If such a virus could work on the Geth, then it would also work on any other computer. The virus she was looking at was proof the humans were capable of massive cyberattacks. With them being insane, she was wondering about her odds. That was why she couldn't leave. She had to make sure the humans didn't double cross them. She had to keep an eye on the AI.

Back to the task at hand, she looked for flaws.

"Okay, so far it looks pretty good, but there are a few improvements that could be made. We should probably optimize it to spread through Geth network architecture more efficiently.", Tali said.

EDI's avatar appeared.

"I agree with that assessment. It needs to spread as quickly as possible, pinpointing the source.", EDI said.

Tali nodded, barely believing she was working with an AI to destroy the Geth.

"We have work to do."

* * *

><p>The slipspace trip to the Nius Tor system was quick. Now, it was just a matter of waiting for the Normandy to pick up Geth transmissions.<p>

Tali had finished with EDI a little while ago, and was currently training with Garrus and the SPARTANs. Shepard knew the aliens' training was probably going well, despite their differences with the SPARTANs. It was necessary that they learn how to pilot the Scorpion, since both aliens had technical skills. If they could drive the tank, it would free up his SPARTANs for other tasks. Tali would especially be useful for the job. Garrus could probably be used more efficiently as a designated marksman, but at the moment Shepard didn't want to put too much on the Turian's shoulders. He was already suspicious of Shepard. Shepard considered benching him, but that would only make him more suspicious. No, it was best to keep him in the game.

"Shepard, we have found a Geth presence on the planet Antibaar. It is a cold, inhospitable world. I do not recommend you go out without your MJOLNIR armor on. Although I doubt you would anyway.", EDI said.

"Okay then. I suppose Miranda will need to sit this one out. Besides, she's better on the ship anyway. The rest of the team should be in the hangar right now. You're coming too, since you have to install this virus.", Shepard said.

Before EDI could say anything he took her AI chip out of the console and put it into his MJOLNIR Helmet, allowing her to interact with his neural implants. EDI once again found herself inside the elusive mind of Commander Shepard. They exited the bridge and set course for the hangar.

* * *

><p>"You know, you're not half bad at this.", Ashley said.<p>

She was watching Tali get a hang of the Scorpion's controls very quickly. Training aliens on how to use human equipment was not something she had planned on doing when she woke up this morning, but orders were orders. She could trust Shepard, after all. He knew what he was doing. He also seemed to be pretty good at finding talent. The

alien woman was handling the tank like she had been doing so for years.

Ashley was standing next to the Scorpion tank, giving the aliens pointers on how to use the behemoth. The Scorpion II tank hadn't changed much from it's predecessor. It had a plasma machine gun turret on where it's regular machine gun turret used to be, and it used a low power MAC Cannon in place of the old 90mm High Velocity Cannon. Tank treads were replaced with anti-grav treads, allowing the tank to move faster and turn more quickly.

"Thanks.", Tali said.

For all the strange things about humans she had seen, she had to admit that they had excellent equipment. The Scorpion was better than the Mako by a long shot. She didn't want to admit it, but she was looking forward to driving it. Garrus seemed to be enjoying himself as well. He was sitting in the machine gun turret. Operating it seemed pretty straight forward. She had heard from Ashley that the tank could be piloted by one person, provided you had the correct neural implants. Sadly, she did not. That would have been a sight to see.

The entrance to the hangar opened to reveal Commander Shepard, fully clad in his armor. He seemed to be hauling some weapons and equipment.

"How goes the crash training session?", Shepard asked.

Ashley and the other SPARTANs turned to face her superior.

"The Scorpion is designed to be easy to drive, so they caught on pretty quickly. If they need to drive the Scorpion, I think they're qualified.", Ashley said.

She left out her opinion that they shouldn't be allowed to see the Scorpion at all, much less drive it. They were aliens. However, it wasn't her place to question Shepard's orders.

"Good. We've found a target. There seems to be Geth activity on the planet Antibaar. It's a cold, inhospitable enviroment. Our MJOLNIR armor will protect us from the dangerous enviroment, but Garrus and Tali have no such luck. They will drive the Scorpion as our armor support. The objective is to plant the tracer virus in a Geth platform and make sure it finds where the majority of the Geth are operating from. I brought your gear so we can get started right away.", Commander Shepard said.

The team picked up their guns and equipment. Kaidan and Ashley chose the plasma battle rifle, a three shot burst weapon. They also grabbed plasma grenades and energy drain grenades.

"Now that we're all here, let's go over the plan. This should be a fairly straight forward mission. The Normandy will fire a jammer pod down onto the planet, preventing the Geth platforms from communicating with each other. Vega, you're going to ride in the Pelican and escort Garrus and Tali while they're in the Scorpion. Ashley, Kaidan, and I will drop from orbit and land just outside the enemy outpost. If all goes well, we'll attack them in a pincer attack, with Vega and our armor units coming from one side and my

team from another.", Shepard said.

Everyone nodded, although Garrus and Tali were a stunned by the plan.

"Wait, did you say you were going to jump _from __orbit__?_", Tali asked incredulously.

Shepard casually nodded to confirm.

_Once __again__: __I__'__m __on __a __ship __full __of __crazy __people__!_,_ Tali thought.

"Now that we're on the same page, I'm dividing you into teams for this one. I will be squad leader and in charge of Red Team. Garrus, you are in charge of Blue Team. Move out.", Shepard said.

_Maybe __if __I __give __Garrus __more __control __he__'__ll __be __less __suspicious__.,_ Shepard thought.

Garrus was stunned. He didn't see that one coming. Why would the xenophobic alien place him in command of one of his SPARTANs? The message was not lost on the SPARTANs, either. Whether SPARTANs could feel betrayal he did not know, but he imagined that some might.

Ashley quietly approached Shepard while he was running a suit diagnostic. They both had their helmets on, so she switched to helmet-to-helmet comms.

"Sir, pardon my lack of discipline, but what was that? You just put Vega under the command of an alien!", Ashley asked.

Shepard stared at her. He didn't like insubordination, but she deserved an answer to that question.

"Garrus is beginning to get suspicious of our motives. If his sentiment begins to spread, it might put the mission in jeopardy. Putting him in charge of a team might help allay his fears. Trust me on this one.", Shepard said.

Ashley nodded in agreement. She didn't like it, but she knew Commander Shepard was right. If Garrus started to believe they were up to something, it could hurt their standing in the galaxy. Miranda's words echoed in the back of her head. Sometimes the job isn't gunning down threats to the Alliance, sometimes it's about defusing conflicts. Letting Garrus lead was a necessary sacrifice. Plus, it didn't seem to bother Vega too much. He was just happy to go on a mission. As long as that was the case, it wouldn't harm anything.

Shepard handed Kaidan and Ashley a thruster pack for the precision jump. Their suit was self guided, so accuracy wasn't going to be an issue. The thruster pack was just to give them a push in the right direction.

"Okay. Let's get ready to drop.", Shepard said.

Red Team lined up against the force field keeping the hangar's atmosphere from leaking out into the vacuum of space. They were

facing the hangar rather than space. Everyone took a few deep breaths. Orbital insertions were a relatively new technique for SPARTANS, only made possible by the latest version of MJOLNIR Armor. The upgrade only intensified the heated rivalry between the ODSs and the SPARTANS, but it was very useful.

Red Team readied themselves, and prepared to jump.

"Three, two, one. Go!", Shepard shouted.

Shepard and his team fell backwards, as if they were doing a trustfall. Once they were all out in the vacuum of space, they activated their thruster packs. The thruster packs released a great burst of energy, propelling the SPARTANS towards the icy planet.

The fall seemed like it was going to last forever. The only sound the SPARTANS heard was their own heavy breathing, repeating the breathing exercise they had been taught during training. It was designed to prevent them from passing out as they made the long descent to the planet below. It only made the fall seem longer.

In truth, they were moving at speeds that would kill a normal human being. Even ODSs would struggle to maintain themselves under the stress of so many g forces. The SPARTANS' augmentations and MJOLNIR armor allowed them to take the strain. The armor was in itself acting like a drop pod, protecting the SPARTANS from the vacuum and preventing them from turning into human soup as they fell.

They fell through each layer of atmosphere like a boulder falling from it's perch in the mountains, ready to strike the ground below.

Once they passed through the exosphere, they entered the planet's very thin thermosphere, where ultraviolet light pounded their armor. It was here they shed their thruster packs, as they were no longer needed and would burn up in the atmosphere as they fell. The next layers were the mesosphere and stratosphere. The mesosphere was quiet, although their armor was heating up due to the reentry.

As they entered the stratosphere, their suit compensated for the high-speed winds they were sure to face. If they messed up here, they could end up miles from their target.

They then reached the upper level of the troposphere, the layer of atmosphere in which the planet's violent weather occurred. They all pulled their chutes in unison, allowing the incredibly tough strands of fiber to resist the winds and snow, slowing the falling SPARTANS down to speeds at which they wouldn't get killed when they landed. The MJOLNIR pumped the suit's hydrostatic gel to the max to help absorb the force as they hit the ground.

Finally, the SPARTANS hit the ground with a mighty thud, leaving a small crater despite the parachute's attempt to slow them down.

They all landed in a kneeling position, and immediately cut their chutes to prevent themselves from being swept away by Antibaar's high speed winds.

Shepard was the first to stand. He checked his lifesigns for any signs of broken bones or other injuries. It was unlikely that such an

injury would happen, but possible nonetheless. He found found none. The hydrostatic gel did it's job.

"Ashley, Kaidan, sound off!", Shepard said over slipspace comms. He had to make sure everyone was okay before moving on.

"Here.", Kaidan said.

"Here.", Ashley said a second or two later. The two of them were nearby to Shepard, but he couldn't see them for the blizzard restricting his vision.

"I hope we don't have to do that again anytime soon.", Kaidan said.

It was his first real combat jump. He hated orbital insertion, even in training.

That wasn't Ashley's opinion, though.

"I think I like this insertion method.", she said to counter Kaidan.

"Switch to SPARTAN Vision. Mark each other as friendlies. Kaidan, check on the jammer's signal. Make sure it's working. When I turn it on, I want it to work. Ashley, keep a lookout for the Geth. I'm going to check on Blue Team.", Shepard commanded.

"Yes sir!", they said in unison.

Shepard was hoping he hadn't screwed up by making Garrus Blue Team Leader. Now he was about to find out._
>

* * *

><p>While SPARTAN Red Team was doing their harrowing descent, Garrus and Blue Team loaded up the Pelican. Seeing as Vega couldn't fit inside the Scorpion, he opted to ride in the Pelican while Tali and Garrus sat in the Scorpion. Tali had taken the driver's position while Garrus took the plasma machine gun position. Both were enclosed, so neither of them would be exposed to the vacuum of space.<p>

Their descent was comparatively quicker, aided by the Pelican carrying the Scorpion tank beneath it. UNSC equipment was made to last, so the Scorpion had no problems as it passed through the planet's atmosphere. They reached their landing zone not too far away from the Geth outpost they had scoped out from orbit.

Vega hopped down from the Pelican and took a seat on the Scorpion's bumper. Armed with a SPARTAN laser and his MJOLNIR Armor, he was ready to face the hostile planet.

"So Garrus, what are our orders?", asked Tali.

Garrus thought things over. If he attacked before Shepard activated the jammer, the Geth would be much tougher to kill. On the other hand, if he waited too long, then Shepard wouldn't have the tank support he needed. He could call in, since Shepard had allowed Tali

to link his and her comms up to the human slipspace communication method. No, he needed to check things out for himself.

"Take us as close to the Geth base as possible without being seen.", Garrus said.

"Okay.", Tali said.

She drove the tank up the side of a nearby ridge, just barely preventing the Geth platforms from seeing them. The outpost was more heavily manned than they anticipated.

"There are a lot of those things down there.", Vega said.

"Yeah.", Garrus replied.

Vega was right, there had to be twenty or so Geth, and at least one Armature. How did Shepard plan on taking them out?

"Garrus, this is Shepard.", Shepard said over the comms.

"I read you Shepard.", Garrus responded.

"We know where you are. On my count, come over the ridge and attack.", Shepard said.

"Gotcha. Just say when.", Garrus said.

Now, he just had to wait.

* * *

><p>"Red Team, on me.", Shepard commanded.<p>

Ashley and Kaidan formed up behind Shepard, and they began to walk towards the Geth encampment. SPARTAN Vision allowed them to see through the dense Antibaar snow, making their movement much smoother than it would have been otherwise. Due to this advantage, they were getting closer to the outpost faster than they anticipated.

No one spoke, which was common on missions. SPARTANs focused on completing the mission. Comm channels were typically used for mission critical communications only. Otherwise, it would indicate lack of discipline. The good thing was Tali and Garrus seemed to recognize this, which was another sign of discipline. Shepard never doubted Garrus, since Turians were a naturally disciplined race and Garrus had been through enough military training to qualify for an elite unit like the Spectres. Shepard's real worries were about Tali. She wasn't a warrior, she was a civilian who happened to carry a gun and stumbled across evidence proving Saren was a war criminal. She was the odd man out in a group of SPARTANs Shepard had hand picked for the mission and a Turian Spectre. Time would tell if she would crack under pressure.

Red Team reached their checkpoint. They were facing the side of the enemy camp opposite to Blue Team. Red Team used their VISR to mark the Geth units as hostile. They crouched and pulled out their weapons to make sure the elements hadn't damaged them. Thankfully, the UNSC built their weapons to last and the intense cold didn't damage them.

Knowing all their equipment was functioning correctly, Shepard examined their situation. There was an Armature folded up in the center of the camp, a high value target. The Geth platforms were divided into three groups of five, with a Prime in the center group. There were four rocket Geth in towers, a primary threat to the Scorpion. Those would have to be taken care of quickly.

"Ashley, Kaidan, get your energy drain grenades out. I'm about to activate the jammer. Once I do that, the Geth will know someone is here. We'll have to act quickly. On my mark, toss the ED grenades into the camp. Blue Team, be ready. The grenades going off is your signal to move in.", Shepard said over the slipspace comms.

Everyone understood the order, but no one bothered to say so over the comm channel. Shepard knew they would follow orders anyway.

SPARTAN Red Team readied their ED Grenades while Vega lined up a shot on the Geth Prime with his laser. Garrus readied himself and his plasma machine gun turret for targets, while Tali grew increasingly nervous with each second.

Shepard pulled up his the equipment option on his neural implants and selected the jammer. He then hit activate. The Geth reacted with remarkable speed. They knew someone was in presence, but the platforms couldn't communicate with each other. They were restricted to their internal network, which was hampering their combat ability.

Shepard saw the disoriented Geth fumbling around, and saw his chance.

"Go!", Shepard shouted.

With that command, the elaborate trap they had set up activated. Three ED grenades arced through the air and landed at the feet of two groups of Geth, instantly draining the power from their system. Vega fired his SPARTAN Laser and in the blink of an eye several bursts of laser struck the Prime, disabling it. Vega didn't take the time to watch the Prime fall apart and charged up another shot, this time aiming at one of the Geth wielding rockets.

Tali and Garrus took that as their cue to take the Scorpion over the hill. Garrus aimed and held down the turret's trigger, blanketing the frozen land with blazing hot plasma. The bolts of plasma burned through the Geth platforms. Tali took aim with the Scorpion's MAC and fired a shot into the Armature, knocking the four-legged Geth tank platform back. The Armature responded in kind with a blast from it's cannon, scoring a direct hit on the Scorpion. The tank's shields took most of the damage, but part of the controls inside broke from the shockwave.

"Bosht'et!", Tali shouted at the realization.

"What is it?", Garrus asked with concern in his voice.

Tali examined the control panel.

"I think the blast somehow severed the manual controls to the main turret. I can't fire the main gun, not unless I somehow got the

human's neural implants.", Tali told Garrus.

Garrus sprayed another plasma volley to try and suppress the Geth.

"Can you fix it?", Garrus asked.

Tali took a look at the control panel.

"I think so. Let's hope omni-gel works on human vehicles...", Tali said hopefully.

She carefully applied the omni-gel to to the control panel, praying that the semi-molten material would repair the severed line. Her prayers were answered as the omni-gel repaired the panel, reestablishing control to the MAC turret.

The Armature charged up another shot, but Tali fired the MAC at it before the Armature could fire. The MAC round slammed into the Armature, and this time it blew the forward left leg off. The Armature fell to the ground, unable to move.

The Scorpion turned to give a killing blow to the Armature, but was stopped by three Rocket Geth. Vega took one of them out with the laser to buy Tali time to engage. Unfortunately, this left the crippled Armature alive and still capable of firing.

Ashley saw this coming and took the initiative, sprinting at high speeds from cover. Time slowed to a near stop as her amazing reflexes kicked in. She ran in front of the crippled armature and pulled the pin on all three of her plasma grenades, tossing them at the main cannon of the Armature. Just as the Armature fired it's blast, the grenades detonated the stored up energy inside the Armature. The resulting explosion ripped the Armature apart, turning it into a giant bomb. Shrapnel flew in all directions, bouncing off SPARTAN shields and ripping through the Geth's synthetic muscles.

Ashley dodged the larger pieces of shrapnel and open fired on Geth, with Kaidan holding them in place with his biotics. Ashley and Kaidan continued to fire their plasma battle rifles, burning the Geth soldiers. Shepard held back, waiting for his comrade's weapons to overheat.

All major Geth units were down for the count, with the majority powered down by the ED grenades.

"Clear!", Shepard said after he surveyed the ruined Geth outpost.

"Damage report.", Shepard said.

The teams checked their equipment, looking carefully for damage that it might have gotten during the firefight.

"It looks like we're good, Commander.", Vega said.

"Some of the manual controls in the Scorpion were fried by a blast from that Armature. I managed to do a quick repair, but it will need a more permanent fix once we get back to your ship.", Tali said.

Shepard thought that one over.

__If __what __she __said __is __true__, __then __she __repaired __an __alien __vehicle __she __knew __nothing __about __other __than __how __to __drive __it__. __She __did __it __under __fire__, __too__. __It __took __us __years __to __figure __out __how __exactly __Covenant __vehicles __work__, __let __alone __repair __them__. __Perhaps __I __underestimated __her__._

"Well done everyone. That was about as good a fight I've seen. Quick and clean. Okay, let's partially power one of these deactivated Geth and upload the virus. It's time to trace these flashlight heads back to their source.", Shepard said.

"Shepard, I am detecting a Geth dropship approaching the area. They may be on supply run, as the jammer is preventing platforms from communicating. However, I advise caution. It may be carrying more combat platforms.", EDI said.

Shepard switched back over to squad comms.

"Alright everyone, a dropship is coming this way. Take positions and expect a fight. Protect at least one of the powered down Geth platforms. We'll need one intact to send the tracer.", Shepard ordered.

The SPARTANS took cover behind the scattered debris from the obliterated base, defending a group of depowered Geth.

In an impressive show of tactical skill, Tali took the Scorpion and back up against the side of the ridge, preventing the tank from being flanked from behind.

Shepard pulled out his new weapon, the Valkyrie, and cloaked.

Sure as EDI said, a purple bug-like dropship approached the ruined outpost. It hovered over the ruins, and noticed Shepard's forces. Several standard Geth Platforms fell from the dropship, wielding some kind of strange assault rifle. They made a strange clicking noise as the landed.

Since the platforms couldn't network with each other, the tactics they used were very sloppy. Most didn't take cover and simply started firing. Other charged the entrenched SPARTAN position.

Garrus opened up with a spray of plasma bolts, killing a several charging Geth. Ashley and Kaidan opened up with plasma bursts and biotic pushes. Despite the hail of plasma and dark energy, the Geth just kept coming.

Vega charged up the laser and fired into a crowd of Geth, but the laser's low fire rate was of little help against the horde of Geth descending from the dropship. Every burst of plasma was met with a wall of mass accelerated rounds, enough to rapidly deplete even the MJOLNIR armor's shields.

"We need an orbital strike!", Ashley said.

"We can't. It would fry us and the objective.", Shepard said.

"What about EDI? Why can't we just have her control these things?", Kaidan shouted as he dodged bullets.

"I am currently scanning the Geth and preparing the virus for it's upload. We will be here for much longer if I do not finish preparations now. Until then, I cannot assist you.", EDI said.

"What about the Pelican? We could use it for an airstrike.", Vega said.

Shepard thought about it for a moment. A strafing run would certainly help.

"Shepard, more dropships are inbound. I think that the dropships are somehow still communicating with each other.", EDI said.

__How__? __We__'__re__ __jamming__ __all__ __the__ __frequencies__ __they__ __use__
__in__ __this__ __galaxy__. __How__ __are__ __the__ __drop ships__ __still__
__communicating__ __but__ __the__ __platforms__ __aren__'__t__?_

"EDI, have the Pelican engage the incoming dropships. Once they've been destroyed, have it follow these orders."

Shepard ordered the Pelican to remote land behind the SPARTANs. Now all they had to do was hold out until it arrived.

Kaidan and Ashley's weapons stopped firing. They loaded another energy cell into their weapon, but unfortunately their weapons were venting heat from the green plasma. They had no choice but to wait until their weapons cooled.

Garrus was doing his best to hold the waves of Geth down, but even his volleys could only slow them down. The plasma weapons were overheating.

Tali focused on the dropship itself, firing the Scorpion's MAC. However, the turret could not keep track of the dropship that was moving in random direction. It didn't stop her from firing.

__Bosht__'__et__! __It__'__s__ __moving__ __in__ __random__ __directions__ __to__
__keep__ __me__ __from__ __locking__!__
>

More Geth were coming at them, and with their weapons cooling down they didn't have much to fight with. Vega and Kaidan tossed whatever plasma grenades they had left, taking down a good chunk of the Geth. They were replaced by more coming from the drop ship.

Vega finally said what everyone was thinking.

"How many of those things are there?", Vega asked.

"I don't know. Geth dropships are known for being able to move a large amount of Geth from one place to another, even more than standard troop transports. The Geth don't need things like atmosphere or gravity, so they can get more room for troops.", Tali said while still trying to take down the Geth dropship.

"Yeah, I can see!", Vega said.

Vega fired his last shot on his laser, and the SPARTANs switched to their side arms. They hammered the trigger as fast as they could, not bothering to charge up their shots. Their pistols weren't designed for a high rate of fire, so the Geth began making progress.

Suddenly, three plasma grenades landed in the middle of the platoon of Geth. All three went off at once in a perfectly synchronized explosion, taking out a good chunk of the robotic warriors. Shepard uncloaked behind the group and fired his Valkyrie rifle. The evolution of the Avenger AR fired a two shot bursts at the remaining Geth. The first round broke the Geths' shields and the second killed. Shepard carefully focused his shots, drawing attention to him and buying his squad time for their weapons to cool.

The other SPARTANs breathed a sigh of relief, glad for the brief respite. Their plasma weapons were finally cooling off. The freezing Antibaaar temperatures aided the cooling process, and in a second they were ready to fire once more. Ashley and Kaidan simultaneously exited cover and opened up on the the remaining Geth units, flanking them in a hammer and anvil tactic. Garrus supported them by cutting off possible escape routes with a wall of plasma. Vega got in on the action by pulling out his sidearm, hammering the plasma pistol's trigger. Tali focused on the dropship. Her random volleys of MAC rounds would look foolish to the untrained eye, but in reality her strange firing pattern kept the dropship moving. As a result, it could not drop more platforms to reinforce the Geth on the ground.

Trapped between SPARTAN Red Team and Blue Team, the Geth had nowhere to go. They were ruthlessly slaughtered as the skill and discipline of the SPARTANs took over in combination with their superior weaponry. The Geth barely got a shot off. In a second, every hostile Geth platform was on the ground. Scorch marks covered the ground from their engagement.

That left the dropship as the last target.

"Shepard, the Pelican has arrived. However, it's weapons have overheated during it's previous fight.", EDI said.

A Pelican uncloaked as it landed behind the SPARTANs, safe from harm since there were no Geth on the ground.

That wasn't good. He was counting on using the Pelican for anti-air. He would have to improvise. Shepard ran inside the Pelican and grabbed three plasma charges and the detonator. Shepard grabbed onto the side of the Pelican.

"Bring us along side. Tali, stop firing the MAC.", Shepard said.

Both Tali and EDI obeyed his command, and the dropship began to steady itself. EDI took the Pelican parallel to the dropship. Shepard then tossed the plasma charges onto the dropship's hull and fell from the hovering Pelican, hitting the detonator on his way down. The result was a blue explosion above him. The plasma expanded inside the magnetic field emitted by the charge, focusing the heat onto the hull

of the dropship. The combination of heat and pressure tore the dropship apart. Pieces of glowing-hot metal rained from the sky, along with remains of whatever reinforcements might have been inside.

At the same time, Shepard watched the white hot metal shards descend as he fell. The orange glow of the falling metal dotted the snowy white sky. The sight was like looking up at the night sky and seeing hundreds of stars, each one glowing at a different intensity and of a different size than the other.

Shepard's MJOLNIR pumped up it's hydrostatic gel, awaiting for impact with the icy ground. Shepard then hit the ground. The soft bed of snow crunched as he landed on it. Shepard slowly got back on his feet and checked his gear. Everything was in working order.

He walked back over to his comrades. They were standing over a pile of melted robotic parts.

"Status report.", Shepard said over comms.

"We're good.", Ashley answered for the SPARTANs.

Garrus and Tali were slower to report, still stunned by Shepard's amazing feat.

"We're good too, Shepard.", Garrus answered.

Shepard slowly walked over to the powered down Geth platforms they were going to use to spread the tracer virus. Unfortunately, the fire fight had damaged most of them. However, one was still in good condition.

"Alright everyone, let's upload this virus before another one of those things show up. EDI?", Shepard said.

"Yes Shepard. I am slowly powering up the Geth right now. If we upload the virus in this state, the Geth may not notice it. This is our best chance.", EDI said.

"Do it.", Shepard said.

EDI began the upload, cleverly disguising the virus as another Geth program. The Geth wouldn't anticipate another virus disguised as a Geth joining their ranks, at least not if they woke up from being powered down with it being there.

"Upload complete.", EDI said.

Shepard took that as his cue to end the mission.

"Mission accomplished everyone. SPARTANs, get back in the Pelican. We'll pick the Scorpion up and take it with us.", Shepard ordered.

The SPARTANs obeyed his orders without hesitation. Even with their MJOLNIR armor on, the freezing enviroment of Antibaar was one they were eager to get out of. The Pelican landed and opened it's doors, inviting the SPARTANs in. The SPARTANs piled into the Pelican, with Shepard being the last to arrive.

The Pelican then lifted off and linked up with the Scorpion. With that, they lifted off into the sky. Shepard turned off the planetwide jammer preventing the Geth platforms from communicating with each other.

"Is it working, EDI?", Shepard asked.

"Yes. The virus is currently spreading throughout the Geth network. In time it will lead us to the center of their network. Furthermore, I can confirm that we can reprogram the Geth.", EDI replied.

Good. All was going as planned. As soon as the virus got back to him, he would be able to initiate phase two of his plan. As Shepard knew, the forces of this galaxy were no match for him or his SPARTANs.

For all the successes of the mission, puzzles seemed to have formed as well. Why couldn't the jammer prevent the dropships from communicating? It worked on the Geth ground platforms.

_Or _did _it_?_

Shepard recalled the fight with the Armature, and how it had stayed alive for so long. It was sure to have many more programs in it than the platforms, so it would have been smart enough to call for reinforcements. It had to have called that dropship in. That dropship came to deliver reinforcements, not weapons or building materials. The Dropship also had to have called in more reinforcements, otherwise the Pelican wouldn't have been occupied fighting two more dropships.

In other words, for some reason the enemy air forces were displaying fairly advanced tactics, but the ground forces weren't. This was a puzzling development.

However, he couldn't worry about that at the moment. He had just scored a great victory. It was time to prepare for the next step of his plan: Take control of the Geth.

****Author*****s*****Note****

****This ****was ****fun ****to ****write****. ****I ****always ****enjoy ****doing ****fight ****scenes****, ****although ****I ****prefer ****to ****use ****them ****sparingly****. ****I ****tried ****to ****make ****them ****seem ****as ****true ****to ****the ****series ****as ****possible****. ****I ****want ****the ****SPARTANs ****to ****fight ****with ****all ****the ****control ****and ****discipline ****a ****UNSC ****soldier ****would ****fight ****with****, ****but ****at ****the ****same ****time ****I ****want ****to ****highlight ****the ****fact ****that ****they****!****re ****super ****soldiers****. ****I ****hope ****I ****did ****that ****well****.****

****Now****, ****I ****have ****some ****announcements ****to ****make****. ****The ****reason ****the ****fic ****seems ****like ****a ****really ****AU ****Mass ****Effect ****fic ****right ****now ****is ****because ****I****!****m ****hesitant ****to ****go ****further ****into ****the ****Halo ****side ****of ****things****. ****Halo**** 4 ****is ****coming ****out ****in ****November****,**

****and ****it ****looks ****like ****a ****lot ****of ****good
****stuff ****could ****come ****with ****it****. ****If ****I ****go
****any ****further ****with ****that ****side ****of ****the
****story ****right ****now****, ****I ****won****!****t ****be
****able ****to ****feature ****Halo**** 4. ****I ****really
****would ****like ****to ****do ****that****, ****so
****we****!****re ****going ****to ****be ****in ****the ****Mass
Effect ****Galaxy ****for ****a ****little ****while
****longer****.**

On **the ****subject ****of ****Shepard****. ****If ****you
****look ****carefully****, ****you****!****ll ****find ****that
****Shepard ****is ****an ****exception ****to ****the ****rule
****when ****it ****comes ****to ****anti****-****alien
****paranoia****. ****He****!****s ****not ****naive ****or
****anything****, ****but ****he****!****s ****essentially ****so
****cocky ****that ****he ****doesn****!****t ****really ****see
****anything ****in ****the ****Mass ****Effect ****galaxy ****as
****a ****credible ****threat****. ****The ****Council****? ****Just
****pawns ****for ****the ****UNSC ****to ****use****. ****Saren****?
****Someone ****he ****has ****to ****kill ****to ****complete
****his ****mission****. ****The ****Geth****? ****Just ****tools
****for ****him ****to ****use ****to ****reach ****his ****goal****.
****He ****thinks ****of ****this ****mission ****as ****an
****opportunity ****to ****stroke ****his ****ego****, ****because
****if ****he ****succeeds ****it ****will ****be ****his ****biggest
****victory ****ever****. ****He ****will ****have ****toppled ****an
****entire ****military****(****a ****military ****no ****one
****else ****could ****beat****, ****by ****the ****way****) ****by
****himself****. ****Without ****any ****UNSC ****reinforcements
****at ****all****. ****That****!****s ****why ****he
****doesn****!****t ****react ****adversely ****to ****things
****like ****gangsters ****coming ****after ****him****.
****It****!****s ****just ****a ****training ****exercise ****to
****him****.**

Also**, ****I****!****m ****sure ****some ****of ****you ****are
****wondering ****why ****I ****changed ****Saren****!****s ****first
****invasion ****to ****Camala ****instead ****of ****Eden
P****rime****. ****My ****first ****reason ****is ****that ****I
****needed ****the ****Council ****military ****to ****get
****involved ****somehow****. ****Camala ****is ****a ****big
****eezo ****supplier ****and ****since ****the ****Batarians
****haven****!****t ****been ****kicked ****out****, ****it****!****s
****vital ****to ****Council ****interests ****to ****keep ****it
****safe****. ****It ****was ****a ****good ****spot****. ****My
****second ****reason ****is ****that ****it ****is ****important
****that ****Eden ****Prime ****be ****a ****human ****colony ****for
****later ****in ****the ****story****. ****I ****won****!****t
****say ****anything ****beyond ****that****.**

The **Nius ****Tor ****system ****is ****the ****Armstrong
****Cluster****, ****but ****since ****there ****are ****no
****humans I went with a Turian name instead****.**

Hopefully **that ****answers ****a ****few ****things****,
****and ****I ****appreciate ****the ****feedback ****from
****everyone****. Until next chapter.**

14. Heretic Station

****Disclaimer: I do not own Halo or Mass Effect.****

* * *

><p>Shepard sat quietly in the observation room. The warmth and the comfort of the room was a welcome change from the frozen wastelands of Antibaar. Despite the relaxing atmosphere of the room, multiple problems seemed to fill his mind. First off, he needed to find a way to help the crew accept the aliens. Aliens or not, they were a useful ally, and he didn't want to give them up.<p>

Both of them had shown remarkable combat prowess, especially considering their basic knowledge on the equipment they were using. Garrus seemed to know how to handle the Scorpion's plasma turret. He controlled the weapon with discipline and control, not spraying plasma at random. His arcs were in perfect position. If Shepard hadn't known otherwise, he might have assumed it was Vega. Tali was proving useful as well. Her engineering capabilities were remarkable. Repairing an alien vehicle one had only been given basic training for while under fire was a feat he had only seen a Huragok achieve. It seemed like his initial assessment of her had been wrong. She was a capable fighter, at least as far as the Scorpion went. The problem with her was not that she was an excellent warrior. Her problem was distrust. It was limiting her usefulness. He was hesitant to allow her in engineering for fear that she would sabotage the ship or steal military secrets. Letting her in the AI Core was a massive risk that Shepard didn't want to repeat again. He knew if she tried something EDI would alert him, but he didn't want to kill any of the aliens. That wouldn't help him at all. He had to convince them to trust him.

But how? Garrus was growing more suspicious by the hour, and Tali was probably thinking of an escape plan. The SPARTANs wouldn't fight as effectively if they were afraid they were going to get shot in the back when they called for support. He could kick them off the ship, but that would only ease the humans on the ship. The alien military would be wondering why he had kicked them off in the middle of a mission.

There had to be some way to unify the team. He could lie, but every lie he could think of would be seen through by Garrus. The turian was an ex-cop, and as such he was very difficult to lie to without getting caught. Tali seemed more gullible, but she would most likely take Garrus's word over his. The alternative was to tell the truth.

How can I tell the truth? That wouldn't go over well.

He had to erase their suspicion. Maybe telling them the truth was the answer, but not the whole truth. Perhaps if they knew more of his people, they would be less suspicious.

It wasn't just that he needed them to be less suspicious, he wanted them to be less suspicious. The more he looked at their civilization, the more he saw hope. The people of the galaxy were weak and naive, but they had something that humanity didn't. They had fellowship. They had innocence. Ever since humanity first touched the stars, his people had been alone. Humanity couldn't trust anyone. The Covenant

destroyed any chance of the aliens of the Milky Way working together in peace. Ever since, Humanity locked it's doors and built up it's strength, paranoid that the next great cosmic horror was just around the corner. Everything was trying to kill them. Eventually, the concept of aliens being able to work together in peace vanished. It hurt when it did, too. Humanity was tired of being alone. Everyone was tired of living in fear that tomorrow would be war with aliens. People wanted to know there was good waiting for them out in the stars. These aliens were finally hope. Hope that humanity didn't have to be alone anymore.

The more Shepard thought about it, the more he realized that the war against Saren represented more than another feather in his cap. If he couldn't stop the rogue Spectre, the only thing that could cure humanity's loneliness would be extinguished. He couldn't allow that. He couldn't allow the suffering to continue. Enough was enough.

Putting that problem aside, there was also the strange phenomenon he witnessed on Antibaar. Somehow the Geth air units continued to communicate while the ground unit's couldn't. That didn't make any sense. The jammer should have have stopped all real space transmissions. He didn't find any counter-jamming technology among the Geth. The other possibility was that the jammer had malfunctioned, but Kaidan said that it was working and Kaidan wasn't incompetent. Furthermore, if it had malfunctioned, then it would affect all units. The ground units would be able to communicate with each other, but they weren't. Something was fishy about the whole thing.

Regardless of what happened, there wasn't anything he could do about it at the moment. He would have to wait until the virus found it's target. Then it would contact him and he could proceed to the next phase of the mission.

Growing bored of sitting in the room and doing nothing, Shepard picked up a nearby remote and decided to review some combat footage taken by a soldier during the attack on Camala. With a few clicks of a button, a screen hanging on the wall of the room showed the footage. Three Batarian soldiers frantically took positions as Geth charged down the hill. The middle soldier pushed down the soldier who was recording, saving his life. The three Geth soldiers were killed. On top of the hill stood three spikes, each one with a Batarian body impaled on it. The spikes retracted, releasing three cybernetic monsters that looked vaguely like the Batarians.

Shepard paused for a moment and rewound to the part with the spikes. That was odd. The Geth didn't seem like the type to use psychological warfare. Saren might, but Shepard couldn't imagine Saren coming up with the technology to do something like that. If those spikes did what he thought they did, then they were incredibly advanced. To create cybernetic zombies like that would require expertise on both biology and cybernetics. It would mean filling the impaled body with millions of microcybernetics, such as nanobots, in minutes. The synthetic tissue would also have to replace organic tissue. It was possible they were being controlled by some central operating system as well, so they could have been receiving some kind of signal.

In comparison to other Geth technology, that kind of technology was way ahead of the Geth. Even with Saren's help, he couldn't imagine

the Geth would have the knowledge to create such technology. That technology was even ahead of the UNSC's capabilities. Whoever made it would have to be highly advanced. Could it be these Protheans the inhabitants of this galaxy are constantly talking about? Had the Geth somehow discovered a piece of their technology? It wasn't good if they did. That would mean an even greater degree of technological superiority than they already had.

A realization hit him. The process in which those...husks were made was eerily similar to something else he had seen. The Dragon's Teeth, as the occupants of the galaxy called them, transformed people into zombies through cybernetics. Transformation technology was very complicated and intricate.

Shepard split the screen and pulled up a clip of a UNSC soldier being infected by the Flood. He then played them side by side. Just like the Dragon's Teeth, it transformed a living subject into a zombie soldier. He thought back about the things he had read about the Flood.

343 Guilty Spark said that the Flood was created by the Precursors as revenge against the Forerunners. If the Protheans were capable of Precursor-level technology, it might be worth looking into.

Transformation technology always seems to be very intricate. Even after the war, the UNSC still didn't fully understand how the Flood worked. It might be the same with Husks.

Shepard hit the play button once more and payed careful attention to the screen. The soldiers frantically moved around, scanning the environment for more threats. They seemed like they weren't very organized. This galaxy seemed to heavily rely on mercs, a bad move since they were only loyal to their paycheck. They could simply be soldiers of fortune. A horrifying noise suddenly was heard as the soldier looked up to find the source. The sight he found was one that could hardly be described by mortal minds. Out of the darkened sky came what looked like a massive purple metallic hand. Arcs of red electricity covered it, as if it was carrying so much power it could barely contain it. On closer examination Shepard realized that it wasn't a hand at all. It was a ship. A massive one at that. The appendages he once thought were fingers appeared to be tentacles of some kind. The ship itself seemed to be a massive cuttlefish, that is if a cuttlefish was terrifying.

It didn't look like other Geth ships either. Geth ships looked more like giant bugs. It was possible this was some kind of dreadnought they had created, but something about it seemed different. The way the ship behaved was different. The malevolent sound it made as it descended from the sky and the arcs of red energy made it more like a monster than a ship.

Something was wrong about all of this. The Geth had technology they shouldn't have. Either they had stumbled across a cache of ancient Prothean tech, or there was another party involved in all of this. Someone with technology beyond powerful. Hopefully, it was just the former. He would rather fight the known over the unknown.

However, all of that could wait. He needed to talk to Ashley. If he was going to convince the aliens to trust him, then the rest of the

crew was going to have to help. Ashley was as good a place to start as ever. With her in line, Kaidan and Vega would soon follow.

* * *

><p>Ashley sat on her bed. Her quarters seemed so large compared to the barracks of other military installations she had been in. She even had her own room.<p>

Maybe being a spook has it's advantages.

Shepard did live a pretty luxurious lifestyle in comparison to other SPARTANs. Sure, the ship was designed military. It had the same angular design as the other Prowlers ONI used. It still had the same metal grated floors. However, it was his ship and under his command. He seemed to have nigh unlimited resources as well. Shepard obviously was valuable to HIGHCOMM. Even Miranda admitted that he was a miracle worker.

He would have to be. She couldn't deny that she was a little worried. She trusted Shepard, but he made some wild moves over the past few days. Waging war with only one ship was a gutsy move, one she had never thought about before. Despite the odds, she somehow knew he would pull it off. Shepard was one of the most determined people she had ever met. If anyone could do something like this, it was him.

At least her quarters were okay. Better than okay. It was almost perfect. Almost, being the keyword. It would be perfect if Shepard hadn't let those aliens aboard the ship. It was widely known that aliens couldn't be trusted. The Covenant taught them that. Taking them aboard surely wasn't worth the risk. They were a major risk to the security of the operation and the ship itself. This was one of the UNSC's most advanced ships, yet aliens were on board. It didn't sound like a good idea.

On the other hand, the aliens could put up a fight. They handled that Scorpion tank with the skill of a veteran. Tali was probably one of the more skilled tank drivers she had seen. She may have trained the alien, but she couldn't chalk Tali's success up to her brilliant teaching skills. She couldn't deny their combat usefulness, but did that make them worth it? The SPARTANs could have handled things on their own. They didn't need any outside help.

As she was musing her quarter's door opened, revealing Commander Shepard.

"Hello Ashley.", Shepard said calmly.

Ashley stood to salute.

"At ease, SPARTAN. I came to talk.", Shepard said.

Ashley remained standing, but relaxed a bit.

"About what sir?"

"I came to talk about the aliens.", Shepard said.

Ashley grew noticeably concerned. She inched her way a little closer to the Commander and looked around, as if she were checking to make

sure the aliens weren't listening in on them.

"I want to talk about them too, sir. With all due respect, should aliens be allowed on the ship at all? This is a state of the art UNSC ship. What if they're trying to steal the designs for the slipspace engine? Or worse, what if they came to gather information on our weapons technology? This is among the most advanced ships in the UNSC Navy. Aliens shouldn't be aboard at all. I don't know why we need them to complete this mission.", Ashley said.

Shepard paused for a moment, taking her words in. She was right to an extent. Taking aliens aboard a UNSC vessel as crew members as unprecedented. However, Shepard wasn't much for precedence. They were useful. As long as they were useful assets, there wasn't any reason to get rid of them. He just had to get Ashley to see that.

"Perhaps you are right not to trust the aliens, but for the moment they are our allies. Need I remind you that once we were allies with the Sangheili, our greatest foe? When the Flood was at our doorstep, we became allies. When a greater threat arises, sometimes it is necessary to do things you would have never done otherwise. Working with aliens is not something everyone likes doing, but right now it is necessary. Remember, these aliens are not the Sangheili. They are not the races that glassed our worlds. One day they could be useful allies, with a little work of course.", Shepard said.

Ashley didn't seem satisfied with that answer.

"I'm not saying we should turn down allies, I'm just saying we shouldn't bet on them staying allies. We learned that from the Sangheili, too. Besides, this civilization is weak. I just don't get why we need them in the first place.", Ashley said.

Shepard crossed his arms and leaned against the wall. She was right, in the end they didn't really need them. The UNSC wanted their technology and space to work with, plain and simple. Plus room for some military bases. However, there was something more to it. One day, the people of the alien galaxy could be a great people. It would be wise to make them allies, not enemies.

"Ashley, our job is to protect humanity. By making these aliens allies, it stops one potential threat.", Shepard asked.

Ashley looked down at the floor, contemplating his words. She had never thought about it that way. If they turned out to be lasting allies, they would never grow to threaten humanity. However, how do you know they would be lasting allies in the first place?

"I can see that, it's just it's different being allies with aliens. Look, if you're fighting a bear and the only way to stay alive is to sick your dog on it and run, you'll do it. As much as you love your dog, it isn't human. Members of their species will always be more important to them than humans are.", Ashley said.

Shepard unfolded his arms.

"That it true. That is why we must learn to rely on ourselves as well. Allies are always good to have, but only if you are powerful enough to stand without them. That is why we must continue to grow in power and strength. Having allies doesn't mean that we give up on

being independent. My point is that I want you to make a greater effort to help convince the aliens that we're not the enemy. Lately they have grown suspicious of us, and it isn't helping the mission.", Shepard said.

Ashley got the picture. Her aloofness wasn't helping with unit cohesion. Without unit cohesion, going on missions was going to be that much harder.

"Working with aliens won't be a problem Commander. You say jump, I say how high. Ask me to kiss a Turian, I'll say which cheek.", Ashley responded.

"Good. That's what I like to hear. Although I highly doubt that you'll have to kiss an alien as part of the mission. I'll talk to you later, and don't forget what I said. Winning outside of battle is just as important as winning during battle.", Shepard said.

He then turned and exited her quarters. There was someone else he had to talk to, and he wasn't looking forward to it.

* * *

><p>Garrus walked through the hallway across the metal-grated floor. It was a new experience for him, since the Hierarchy's ships were always solid metal. There was probably a reason for the difference in design, but given the humans' reluctance to share he wouldn't know. Garrus involuntarily found himself looking over his shoulder, checking to see if something was behind him. That was the worst part of being on the human ship. The uncertainty followed you everywhere you went. The SPARTANS had access to invisibility technology, so there was no telling if they were nearby. In addition to that, there was the ship's AI that followed you everywhere. You didn't get much privacy on Hierarchy ships either, but this was different. Furthermore, the humans might not be all they say they are. That didn't ease the tension at all.<p>

Garrus calculated his odds of survival if the humans were behind Saren for some reason. They weren't looking good. The humans possessed armored exoskeletons that made short work of a Krogan and they had the discipline to take down a large amount of Geth. They had energy weapons that could pass through his shields with ease, and whatever weapon Shepard was using against them was one of the most advanced guns he'd ever seen. At least one of them had biotics. The chances of him and Tali escaping the ship were slim at best.

On the other hand, the humans hadn't made any overtly aggressive moves. They were tremendously powerful, but for whatever reason they chose to aid the Council rather than attack. Why? They had no reason to do so. Was he being paranoid? Maybe revealing his suspicions to Shepard wasn't a great idea. Maybe Tali was wrong. Perhaps the humans were just eccentric but good people who wanted to help. Would it be naive to really believe that? But then if that's true, why are they so afraid?

Humans were walking contradictions. They were completely paranoid concerning aliens, even going so far to starve any and all information relating to their society. Yet they were willing to put an alien in charge of one of their own. They were willing to walk up and offer aid to defeat Saren, for no reason at all.

Perhaps there was another reason for their reticence. Perhaps they knew more about the Conduit than they were letting on. The Conduit could be powerful enough to pose a threat to them, and the humans seemed to have a policy of proactively attacking threats before they grew too powerful. Saren could be such a threat. In that case, they may not be willing to admit they have a weakness. Hopefully that was the truth.

Garrus finally reached his destination as the mess hall's door automatically opened. It was time to get something to eat, and it would be a good opportunity to get his mind off the bizzaro race called humanity.

As he entered the room, he could tell that wasn't going to happen. Shepard was sitting there in full armor, barring his helmet, at a table. He was drinking that same horrible brew they called coffee. At first Garrus wondered how the SPARTAN knew he was going to be here, but then he remembered EDI. How humans could ever get used to being watched all the time was beyond him.

Garrus went over to the food storage and grabbed some of the dextro-amino compatible food. Shepard waved him over, and Garrus obeyed. Garrus took a seat across from Shepard as they ate on a sterile metallic table, utilitarian and military in every sense of the word. Shepard sat his mug down.

"I understand you're suspicious of us.", Shepard said.

Garrus dug into some of his noodles and swallowed.

"Yes, I am Shepard. If you're an ally as you say you are, prove it. Answer my questions.", Garrus said bluntly. There was no reason to hold back.

Shepard leaned back in his chair and mentally sighed. He didn't have much of a choice in the matter, not if he wanted to keep things from falling apart. Saren would make an excellent feather in his cap, and this was one he couldn't let paranoia get in the way. HIGHCOMM would kill him if he didn't answer carefully, but it was worth the risk.

"Okay, I'll answer all the questions I can. Shoot.", Shepard said.

Garrus finished another bite of his meal and began.

"Can you tell me about your homeworld?", asked Garrus.

Earth was a touchy question. It was probably okay to tell some about it, but there was no way it's location was going to get revealed.

"I can tell you somethings about it, but not all. It's called Earth.", Shepard said.

Now we're finally getting somewhere., Garrus thought.

"What is it like?", Garrus asked.

Shepard stared up at the dull ceiling, recalling his time on Earth

before he ended up wearing a set of MJOLNIR Armor.

"It varies depending on where you are. Most inhabited regions consist of sprawling metropolises with buildings so high it seems like they touch the stars themselves. Other areas are either too cold to easily inhabit or too hot and dry. Most of the world's forests have been destroyed and the sea levels have risen by quite a bit due to ecological problems. We were growing faster than the planet could support us. Thankfully, the world has returned to ecological stability thanks to our terraforming technology.", Shepard said.

Garrus found that amusing. They basically ran into the same problem that the Krogan did. It makes one wonder what else they have in common with the ancient foe. Was there ascent to the stars bloody, like the Krogan? Or was it peaceful?

"So how did you become so technologically advanced? How did you become a space faring race?", Garrus asked. He had never been this curious about anything before.

Shepard paused. That was another touchy question. The truth behind the reason for human technological advancement was that they were naturally good at taking existing technology and improving on it, most often Forerunner tech. However, he wasn't quite ready to reveal the Forerunners yet.

"It wasn't easy for us. Our first steps into space was in the 1960s. Back then we were just using rockets. As you've seen, we've come a long way from that.", Shepard said, cleverly glancing over the how aspect of their advancement.

Now Garrus was really interested.

"To have military technology like this you must have fought an interstellar war before. Have you?"

Shepard looked down into his coffee mug solemnly, and Garrus realized he hit a nerve. Shepard looked back up at him, and felt like it was a story that needed to be told. It was a story necessary for someone to understand humanity.

"This is a long story, so listen. When we first discovered FTL and began colonizing other worlds, we had a few rebellions in our colonies. That was our first true interstellar war.", Shepard said.

Garrus found that interesting. The Turians once fought a similar war long ago called the Unification War. Perhaps they had more in common than he first realized.

"Then we met the Covenant. They were a hegemony of alien races. They launched a genocidal holy war against us. At the time, our technology was far inferior to theirs. We won a few ground battles, but they were virtually unstoppable in space. Space was all that mattered. You see, they didn't care about capturing us. There were no rules to their warfare. They decided it was easier just to attack us from orbit. They used their superior plasma weapons to burn the surfaces of our worlds until they turned into a glass-like substance, rendering them uninhabitable. We fought valiantly, but it was

pointless. One by one our worlds fell, no matter how fortified they were. They finally found Earth, and began their invasion. They managed to glass half of a continent before we could stop them.", Shepard said.

A chill went down Garrus's spine as he heard the horrifying tale. Now he knew why the humans acted the way they did around aliens. They didn't want a repeat of their past. They knew true horror. It reminded him of his mission against Saren. If he isn't stopped, would the same thing happen to the turians? Would the Geth come and reduce Palaven to a pile of rubble? The war with the Covenant sounded like the Krogan Rebellions, at least in it's severity.

"How did you beat them?", Garrus asked.

Shepard took another drink from his mug to prepare the story.

"They beat themselves. We managed to cause an internal power struggle among them, and they turned on each other. They couldn't focus on both problems at once, so they ended their war with us. Now, we're more powerful than they are, but it was at a great cost. We did rebuild but our species was on the verge of being wiped out. We may have won, but it didn't feel like a victory at all.", Shepard said.

Garrus contemplated Shepard's words. They were powerful, and revealed much about his species. He didn't know about the Humans' sorrow. The galaxy didn't know about their plight. Citadel Space had gone through many a tragedy, but nothing like what Shepard described. The worse part was that Humanity fought their nightmare alone. Even during the Krogan Rebellions, Citadel Space had each other. The different species combined their skills and put the Krogan down once and for all. They were also more technologically advanced than the Krogan.

The Humans had no such advantages. All they could do was struggle against their killers, slowly watching their worlds burn away as an enemy with technology far more advanced than what they had ever seen destroyed them planet by planet. The whole idea was terrifying.

Garrus knew that the Humans had to be a highly ambitious race to do what they did. They reached out to touch the stars, even when it meant strapping a highly combustible rocket to their back. No race he knew would have tried something so suicidal. Deep down, the ambition was rooted in survival. That's what the Humans were. Survivalists. Their paranoia around aliens was justified by their past. They weren't some hostile, aggressive race like the Krogan. They were victims, not perpetrators.

Yet, there was a kindred spirit between them. The Turians and the Humans were not so different after all. Maybe in time the Humans could see this. Only one thing remained to be asked.

"How do I know you're telling the truth?", Garrus asked.

Shepard slowly looked down at the table, and then at Garrus.

"You don't. Right now, I can't prove anything that I said. That doesn't mean it isn't true. You have good instincts, Garrus. What do

they say? You have to believe me. Take a leap of faith.", Shepard said.

Garrus listened to him, and his instincts told him that Shepard was telling the truth. It was time to take a leap of faith. He had to believe.

"I'm sorry Shepard. I guess we never knew about all of this. I believe you, what you say. I can see why your people don't like aliens. You have more than enough justification. You want to stand up for yourselves. But listen to me, Shepard: Standing up for yourselves doesn't mean standing alone. I've been many things. Soldier. Cop. Vigilante. Spectre. My experiences in those jobs have taught me how to sort out the bad guys in the galaxy and protect the good guys from them. Underneath it all, I don't think you're one of the bad guys. I think you're a good guy who is afraid of admitting it. No one here wants to be your enemy, Shepard. Trust us to be more than simple tools.", Garrus said.

Shepard stared into his coffee, and deep down he agreed with everything Garrus said. Humanity didn't have to stand alone. He would make sure Humans always stood above all others, but that didn't mean standing alone. That was what he was really tired of being. His aloneness was something that couldn't be cured by something like a romantic relationship. That wasn't what he desired, anyway. He was married to being a SPARTAN. His aloneness was on different scales. On a species wide scale, he was tired of humanity being alone. He was tired of everyone being paranoid, only trying to cover it up by humanism. The sorrow was always just beneath the surface. His loneliness was also on a personal level. Everyone he met seemed to die. He was the only one of his comrades that was good enough to survive. Life was hard when all that you know crumbles around you. His skill was a curse. He was always just good enough, just lucky enough to survive whatever was thrown his way. His friends were not.

It had to change, somehow.

"I've been told that I'm a cold hearted pragmatist, Garrus. That I only care about victory. If you thought that, you would be right. The will to win has kept me going my entire career. I knew that if I kept winning, it meant Humanity's chances for survival got better, even if my actions only bought us one more day. That one more day was worth fighting for. I fight not just for victory, but for what that victory represents. I may be a cold hearted pragmatist, but I want my victories to mean something. I used to fight for one more day, but seeing your civilization has lead me to wonder if there is something more to fight for. I'm tired of standing alone. Deep down, every human is tired of being alone. We're tired of locking our doors at night knowing that there are alien races out there who hate us and would kill us given the chance. We want to know that the whole universe isn't out to kill us, that there is good out in the stars somewhere.", Shepard said.

He paused for a moment, staring into his coffee mug. He didn't expect to be talking about this, but he might as well. Deep down, that was the reason he was still here. He could kill Saren without Garrus or Tali. He couldn't be allies with the aliens without them.

"Your people represent hope. Hope that we don't have to stand alone

anymore. If so many species can be part of one government without going to war or resorting to some kind of totalitarian order like the Covenant, maybe we don't have to be alone anymore. I trust you Garrus. It will take time, but I believe others will trust you as well. I'll make sure you have greater access to the ship. I need you to convince Tali to trust us as well. Also, I want you and her to drop by Engineering later on.", Shepard said.

Garrus put his eating utensils down.

"Thanks Shepard. We won't let you down. I'm sure Tali will fall into line when I knock some sense into her.", Garrus said.

It felt good to actually let the aliens know about humanity's past, although Miranda would probably throw a fit. She could be dealt with later. However, it's was Shepard turn to question.

"So Garrus, how long has it been since you commanded a team?", Shepard asked.

Garrus was caught off guard by the question. How did Shepard know?

"Why do you ask?", Garrus said.

"You know why. I know a veteran when I see one. Yet for some reason you came onto my ship without any back up at all. Then, when I appointed you Blue Team leader, you seemed surprised. It wasn't just because I gave you command, it was more than that. Tell me what is going on.", Shepard said.

So the human leader finally saw the truth. Shepard was perceptive, at least.

"Before all this started, before I was made Spectre, I went to Omega. The Council wouldn't believe me when I told them Saren was up to something. I got fed up with all the red tape and bureaucracy and quit C-SEC. I decided to go someplace where there was no red tape to get in my way. I went to Omega, the most lawless place in the galaxy. I became a vigilante, got named Archangel by the locals. Eventually a few other people joined me, trying to make a difference. We were effective for a long while, and then we got betrayed by one of our own. Sidonis sold us out, and we got trapped. I was the only one to make it out alive. I went back to the Citadel, became a Spectre, and the I killed Sidonis. I haven't lead a team since.", Garrus said.

Shepard heard his story, and knew his pain. It brought vivid memories of Torfan back to mind, memories he couldn't forget.

"What about Tali? She was working with you."

"Tali? We're close friends and all, but we rarely fight together. She is mainly assisting command with ways to fight the Geth. I do most combat alone."

Shepard understood his pain, but they needed Archangel again. They needed him if they were going to beat Saren. Time heals most wounds, but sometimes they need to be patched up first.

"What if I told you that something similar happened to me?", Shepard said.

Garrus perked up, suddenly very interested.

"It did?", Garrus said with surprise.

Shepard nodded.

"After the war, a major Insurrectionist faction rose up on the planet Torfan. They launched an attack on the newly re-terraformed Eridanus II. Their main target was New Elysium City. They attacked quick, but we managed to defeat them. I was tasked to have my team run point on the counterattack. There were orbital guns covering the planet, and HIGHCOMM wanted them gone before the invasion. One of my team members had an ulterior motive, and the rest of my team payed for it. We completed the mission, but the cost was too high.", Shepard said.

Garrus listened carefully. They weren't so different after all.

"How do you continue? How do you go on, knowing that you failed them?", Garrus asked solemnly.

"It's possible. From that day forth I gained a reputation as a man willing to do whatever it takes to win, and I embraced it. Pretty soon I found myself tasked on high priority missions that the UNSC couldn't afford to fail. For a while I did work alone, but as I thought about it I realized that I didn't fail my subordinates at all. They signed up for the job knowing that there was a good chance they would die. I did my best to keep them alive, but sometimes a leader must be willing to sacrifice himself and others to win. It's not easy, being a leader. But it's worth it. There aren't many people out there who can really lead, but you're one of them. The galaxy needs you right now. Don't let Omega keep you from being all that you can. When the time comes, I want you to get out there and show Saren that he has just as much to fear from you now as those criminals on Omega had to fear from Archangel. Show no mercy. No remorse. I might be here to help you fight, but this show is ultimately yours, Garrus.", Shepard said.

Garrus thought about what Shepard said. The human was right, in the end everyone he worked with knew there was a good chance they might not come out alive. It didn't take the sting of their death away, but he didn't fail them. Now, he had the opportunity to make their sacrifice mean something. If he couldn't beat Saren, everyone who died fighting will have died in vain. He had to let go and move on with his life.

"Thanks Shepard. You're right. Well, I better go talk to Tali. She's not going to take your word on everything."

Garrus then put away his plate.

With that, they both exited the mess hall.

* * *

><p>"I can't believe you're actually listening to him!", Tali shouted in her quarters.<p>

Humans were expert manipulators, and she wasn't going to start listening to them anytime soon.

"Tali, they aren't the enemy! Saren is the enemy, and if we stop trusting our allies and let Saren find the Conduit, there may not be a Palaven to go back to. There won't be a Thessia, or even a Citadel.", Garrus said.

Tali gave Garrus an armor piercing gaze.

"My people haven't had a home. You wouldn't help us take ours back. Maybe it's time the Quarians repay the favor. Besides, how do you know he isn't lying?", Tali said hatefully.

Garrus stood still, giving Tali a stern gaze.

"I know you don't believe that. Saren wouldn't let the Quarians live if he got what he wanted. I know the Humans aren't lying. I can't explain why, but something in my gut is telling me that we can trust Shepard. At the very least we have a common goal. If you trust me, trust Shepard.", Garrus said.

Tali took a seat on her bed. Humans used dangerous technology and seemed all around crazy. However, Garrus hadn't led her wrong. For whatever reason, he believed the humans. Maybe she was just being paranoid. But she could be right.

Garrus gave her a glare.

"No one will escape Saren's wrath once he gets the Conduit, not even the Quarians. As for Shepard and the humans, my gut is telling me to go with them. I don't think they have anything to do with this. They could be our only way to stop Saren, and I'm not passing our chance up. You've always trusted me before. Trust me now.", Garrus said.

Tali looked away nervously. She had never been so torn in her entire life. If Garrus was wrong, they could be part of some greater plan which most likely ends with their deaths. On the other hand, Garrus had good instincts. He wouldn't lead her wrong.

Tali paced for a brief moment, then turned to face her friend.

"Fine, but I'm doing this for you, not Shepard or his people. Got it?", Tali said.

Garrus nodded.

"Got it.", he said.

EDI's avatar materialized in the room.

"Shepard would like to see you both in engineering.", the AI said.

The two aliens were mildly spooked, but they had learned to expect EDI's presence on the ship. Garrus was even growing used to it, although Tali was slower to adapt.

"Okay, we're coming.", Garrus said.

The two aliens exited the room, wondering about what surprise Shepard had in store for them.

* * *

><p>Tali and Garrus waited as the elevator slowly crept towards Engineering, both wondering why a species so advanced would use such a slow elevator. It was faster earlier, so it must be malfunctioning.<p>

"You remember how we used to have those talks while on the elevator?", asked Garrus with a wry smile. It was past time he brought this story up.

Tali didn't want to bring up this one again.

"No.", she said, obviously trying to end the conversation before it started.

Garrus wasn't going to let her live it down.

"Come on, remember how I would ask you about life on the Flotilla? It was an opportunity to share!", Garrus said.

"This conversation is over.", Tali said dryly.

"Tell me about your immune system again.", Garrus pushed.

"I have a shotgun.", Tali threatened.

"Maybe we'll talk some other time.", Garrus said as he conceded defeat.

The elevator finally brought them to their destination, and as they exited Shepard was waiting for them.

"Come with me, it's time you met a friend of mine.", Shepard said cryptically.

Garrus and Tali looked at each other and then followed Shepard through an automatic door and into engineering. The sight that greeted Tali was breathtaking.

"Keelah... This is what engineering looks like in your ship? This technology is amazing! Especially that!", Tali said while pointing to the ship's oversized slipspace drive.

Tali was like a kid in a candy shop, looking at all the wondrous things in the room. Garrus was impressed as well, but not quite on the same level.

"Really? I thought the technology was too dangerous to use.", Shepard said.

The irony was not lost on Tali who rolled her glowing eyes at the the Commander as she turned to face him.

"Ha ha. Very funny.", Tali said dryly.

"What did you bring us down here for? Surely it wasn't just to tempt Tali with amazing technology.", Garrus said.

Shepard leaned against a control panel and then pressed a button.

"Of course not.", Shepard said.

A metal door on the other side of Engineering opened, revealing a strange floating creature. It looked like it was carried by balloons of some sort, but on closer examination it looked like they were actually part of the creature's body. It had many tentacles on it. Its head was small. It seemed like a peaceful creature, but Garrus knew appearances could be deceiving.

"Meet Falls Slower Than Most. He's the ship's engineer.", Shepard said.

Tali stared curiously at the creature. She wondered what species would use such strange names. It seemed so benign in comparison to the humans. The creature moved its tentacles around in certain shapes, almost like some kind of complex sign language. Shepard seemed to take note of this.

"He says hi, and he likes your envirosuit Tali.", Shepard said.

Tali stared at Shepard incredulously.

"How do you know what he is saying? Also, what species is he, anyway?", Tali asked.

"I know his language, and his species is called the Huragok. Anyways, we need to get to the point of why I brought you down here in the first place. You've proven excellent in a fight, but I can't have you running around with inferior equipment. Falls here is going to fix you up.", Shepard said.

The Huragok nodded to confirm Shepard's words.

Tali was somewhat confused.

"Fix us up? How?", she asked.

Shepard smiled.

"I think he would rather show you than tell you.", Shepard said.

Falls Slower Than Most moved closer to the two other aliens, starting first with Garrus. Garrus stood uncomfortably as the Huragok moved his tentacles around the body, carefully examining his armor. Then, he began making upgrades. His tentacles moved so fast the eye could not keep up with them as it upgrades Garrus's armor.

When it finally stepped back, Garrus's armor was its usual blue, but somehow felt stronger.

Tali just stood in awe of the Huragok's upgrades, amazed at what it

could do.

"My armor feels different somehow, like it's doing the work as I move.", Garrus said.

Shepard looked at Falls Slower Than most, and the Huragok responded with his usual sign language.

"He said he upgraded it with a stronger shield than your previous set of armor. If he had more to work with, he would be able to upgrade further, but for the moment that's the best he could do.", Shepard said.

The Huragok then turned it's attention to Tali, who was bracing for the inevitable. The Huragok soon examined Tali, careful not to remove her mask. The creature quickly absorbed all the technical knowledge of the Quarian's suit, and quickly proceeded to upgrade her shields to UNSC standards. The Huragok then signed a few more words to Shepard.

"He says that your shields should be at UNSC ODS1 standards. For now, that will have to do.", Shepard said.

Tali and Garrus examined their newly upgraded armor. It felt magnificent, even if the change was so small.

"I say it's time we test it out. Follow me, we'll go to the VR training room.", Shepard said.

* * *

><p>Kaidan was alone in the VR room, carefully practicing his biotic abilities and practicing the use of a plasma Battle Rifle. He considered grabbing a Gauss Rifle or and Rail Gun, but plasma was better suited for the mission. Since the enemy wasn't using energy shields, the plasma burned straight through. Multiple Geth came after him as he slammed them with biotic pushes and blazing plasma.<p>

He hadn't bothered to set up a full combat scenario, so it was just the Geth coming at him in a dull gray room. He considered calling Ashley or Vega in so they could do a team exercise, but Vega was probably wearing his pull up bar out and Ashley was doing who knows what. It was better he just practice alone anyway.

He didn't get his wish as Shepard and the aliens walked inside. The aliens scanned the large gray room, wondering what it was. Kaidan ended the program and turned to salute the Commander.

"At ease.", Shepard said.

Kaidan dropped his salute and took a look at the aliens, wondering why Shepard allowed them onto the VR deck.

"Commander, I assumed you would be busy elsewhere.", Kaidan said.

Shepard shook his head.

"No, we just got finished upgrading our alien allies' shields. I won't have anyone under my command going into the field with faulty

shields, and I expect our next battle to be an infantry engagement. They won't have the advantage of the Scorpion, and they need some training in our tactics. It's a good thing you are here. You will assist me in their training.", Shepard said.

Kaidan nodded and prepared his Battle Rifle.

"What are your orders sir?", Kaidan asked.

Shepard walked over to a weapon pod and grabbed two battle rifles.

"Follow my lead."

He then walked over to the aliens and handed them the weapons. Garrus, Tali and Kaidan stood near each other.

"Attention!", Shepard shouted.

Garrus, given his military training, followed the order and stood at attention. The rigorously trained Kaidan followed orders immediately, snapping to attention with lightning speed. He held his weapon upright, barrel facing the ceiling. Garrus saw this and swiftly followed the SPARTAN's lead. Tali was slower to obey, but she caught on after Garrus. That was something they would have to work on.

Shepard held up his battle rifle in one hand and began pacing in front of the soldiers like his drill sergeant had done to him so many years ago.

"Listen up, because there isn't very much time to teach you and you have a lot to learn. As long as you are going to fight along with us, you're going to have to learn our weapons. Consider this a crash course in UNSC ground warfare. You may or may not have heard of these tactics, but we're going to be on the same page before our next battle.", Shepard said.

He held up his rifle and held it directly in front of them.

"This is a BR88 Plasma Service Rifle, the backbone of the UNSC ground forces. Every UNSC soldier has held one of these in his hands at some point in his life, and every soldier counts on it to keep them alive in a fire fight. This gun fires a three shot burst of high speed plasma bolts, hot enough to inflict burns so bad that all you'll see left of the target once you're through with them is a pile of charred bones.", Shepard proclaimed.

Shepard put on the helmet he had clipped to his waist and pulled up the program of a Geth Prime coming at him from behind. Shepard snapped around and hammered down the trigger, sending four three shot bursts into the Prime. The green plasma bolts slammed into the Geth, and the Geth Prime's metal glowed bright orange from the plasma's intense heat. Its legs finally gave way as it fell to the ground and broke apart into pieces of blackened metal. Shepard fired one more shot in for good measure. The weapon then overheated, and dual jets of hot green air vented from the rifle.

The aliens watched closely as the Commander demonstrated the weapon on the virtual construct, which Tali theorized was hardlight with a

holographic overlay.

"You get five shots with this weapon to put down your opponent. Then you have to wait for the weapon to cool down. Five shots should be plenty to put down any enemy you come across. Kaidan will continue your training with the weapon.", Shepard said.

He then went over to the weapon's rack and placed the battle rifle on it, and left the room. Kaidan pulled up a few stationary Geth targets for the next phase of their weapons training.

"Okay, we're going to put these Geth targets down.", Kaidan said.

The aliens understood and began firing. Garrus showed excellent skill with the weapon, placing shots expertly even after the targets began to try and dodge shots. His skill as a sniper had a large part to play. Tali was less successful with the weapon, requiring Kaidan to instruct her how to properly aim the weapon. Soon, she was using the weapon as well as any marine would.

Kaidan smiled. The aliens weren't half bad. Not bad at all.

* * *

><p>Kaidan checked the time on his VISR, a feature that seemed only to prolong missions. They had been training for approximately thirty minutes. It was time for a break, lest they burn out all the energy cells on the ship.<p>

"Cease fire.", Kaidan said.

Garrus and Tali stopped firing immediately and turned to face Kaidan who was behind them.

"What's the matter Kaidan? Afraid I'm going to break your record?", Garrus asked with a smile.

Kaidan smiled. Aliens had a sense of humor after all. Although Garrus very well could have broken a few records, considering he was a crack shot who would have scored Marksman if he was in the UNSC. Tali didn't do quite as well, but she did well enough to pass.

"I'm more afraid that we're going to burn through all the energy cells on the ship. Let's take a break for a while. We can talk. I've never gotten to talk with aliens before.", Kaidan said.

He couldn't deny he was curious about the aliens. Shepard had done most of the talking thus far, but he wouldn't mind if Kaidan talked with them as well. Besides, they had nothing else to do at the moment.

Tali placed her hands on her hips.

"Talk? You people don't seem like the most talkative bunch. What do you want to talk about?", Tali asked suspiciously.

Kaidan realized he probably should have seen that one coming. No one had made much of an effort to communicate with the aliens. He would probably be suspicious of the request too.

"I haven't read much about your people other than the Geth. I'm curious.", he said.

Garrus nodded.

"Okay. Shepard was willing to talk to me, I guess I should repay the favor.", Garrus said.

Garrus and Tali placed their weapons on a nearby rack.

"We should probably go someplace more suited to talking. I would hate for a random virtual Geth to ambush me from behind.", Garrus joked.

Kaidan pulled up a program and multiple chairs made of hard light appeared.

"No need. Besides, you've got me with you. I doubt the Geth would try sneaking up on us.", Kaidan said jokingly.

They all took a seat and Kaidan removed his helmet, revealing his short black hair.

"I was wondering how long you guys have been fighting this Saren.", Kaidan asked.

Garrus leaned back in his chair. That was a good question. He knew it had been less than a year since Camala, but it felt like he had been fighting for ages. That was the worst part of the war. The feeling that it would never end, and when it did it would end with Saren holding the Conduit and using it to conquer other worlds.

"It's been less than a year since his first attack. We haven't had much down time since. At first Saren was content to operate in the Skyllian Verge, a neutral territory. Then the Council appointed me as Spectre and I came after him. He decided to strike back in retaliation, and now Citadel space is waging a full scale war against an enemy of vastly greater strength than our own.", Garrus said.

That brought back certain painful memories from his species' troubled past. Kaidan happened to be sixteen when the Covenant showed up on Earth, and he remembered how powerless he felt when they began mowing people down in the streets.

"How is the war going?", Kaidan asked.

Both the aliens seemed to look to the ground, as if they were despairing.

"Not good. The Geth use very advanced technology, and they have nearly unlimited resources. We don't know how many more platforms the Geth have, and with no way to destroy the programs inside them, they're virtually unstoppable. Anything we can do, they can do better. I'll be honest with you. We're growing desperate. The Geth are striking our worlds with great speed. It started with our outer colonies, but then they began attacking Salarian and Asari worlds as well. We managed to drive them away from a few worlds, but for every victory we had a loss. The loss in manpower has severely weakened our

ability to defend ourselves, and by extension Citadel space.", Garrus said.

Kaidan thought about what Garrus said, and realized the situation was much more dire than he first believed. He hadn't heard of a military scenario this bad since the war.

"We still had hope. We had managed to drive the Geth away from several of our worlds, and despite our losses it kept the Geth at bay. That is, until they found Arcellus.", Garrus continued.

"Arcellus? Is that a world?", Kaidan asked.

Garrus nodded solemnly.

"Yes. Arcellus was a secret world where we manufactured our weapons and built our ships. It was second only to Palaven in military manufacturing. We went to great lengths to hide it from Saren, who even as a Spectre didn't know about it. As long as we held Arcellus, the Turian warmachine could keep going. Then it happened. Somehow, the Geth managed to locate Arcellus. Every Turian ship in the Fleet rushed to defend the planet, but a Geth fleet with Saren's flagship met us as we exited the Relay. The flagship chewed through our ships like they weren't even there. Lucky for us, the Battlegroup I was on managed to make a jump to FTL.

We arrived over the planet just in time to see hundreds of nukes going off. Everything on Arcellus was destroyed, including any chance the Turians had to go on the offensive. All forces were recalled to defend the Council homeworlds and the Citadel. They managed to spare one for me to use on an all or nothing assassination mission against Saren, which was what I was on when I ran into you people. You're our last hope to defeat Saren.", Garrus concluded.

Kaidan took in everything Garrus said, and realized how eerily similar it all was to the Battle of Reach. The situation was far more dire than he first knew. This wasn't a game anymore, it wasn't just a skirmish. Millions of people would die if Saren wasn't stopped. Alien or not, they were alive and they weren't going to die because of Saren. Not on his watch.

He then made an important realization. Aliens were different than what he had been told to believe. They despaired like normal people. They had a sense of humor like normal people. They had struggles like normal people. Underneath all of the alien skin, biology and culture, they were just people. They weren't all monsters. Not only did he know their plight, he could empathize with it. He remembered the Human-Covenant war. He remembered the despair, knowing that soon it was going to be his own world that was getting glassed. He couldn't let them go through the same thing.

"We won't let you down. I won't let you down. I know that feeling, like the end is drawing near. I will do everything in my power to keep your people from suffering the way we did. I won't see another race go extinct because of another genocidal war. We'll find a way out of this.", Kaidan said passionately.

Garrus gave a faint smile.

"Thanks Kaidan. I guess you humans aren't all that bad after all.", Garrus said.

Tali just sat there watching the whole exchange. She began to wonder if she was wrong about the humans. Sure, they used some questionable technology, and they all seemed like killing machines. Yet underneath all their insanity and their armor there was a heart. Being on a pilgrimage taught her how to gauge people's emotions, how to tell if they were lying. Kaidan certainly wasn't lying. When he said he was going to do everything in his power, he meant it. He had nothing to gain. He was doing what he was doing because he believed in it.

Maybe I need to rethink them.

Kaidan turned to face Tali.

"The Geth are your people's creations, correct? Do you know anyway to kill them, for good?", Kaidan asked.

Tali nodded.

"Most Geth have a cable running down their back that acts as their spinal cord. Cutting it would prevent the Geth programs from escaping. The trick is to get close enough to actually do it.", Tali said.

Kaidan noted that. It would be useful next time they fight the Geth. One other thing puzzled him about this all.

"Where are the Quarians in all of this? Your people made the Geth, surely you know a way to kill them. From what I've seen, no Quarians are even helping.", Kaidan said.

Tali slowly shook her head, then hesitantly answered.

"Long ago, when the Geth rebelled, my people called the Council for help to take back our worlds. They told us it was our fault and our problem. They wouldn't spare a single ship, let alone a fleet. When they were on their knees and came to us, begging for us to give them whatever anti-Geth technology we had, we gave them the same response. At first it felt good, but then I realized Saren would eventually come after the Flotilla. I tried to convince my people that helping the Council was in their best interests, but no one would listen. I then set out on my Pilgrimage, ran into Garrus, and have been fighting the Geth with him to make up for my people's stupidity.", Tali said.

Kaidan frowned at that.

"You're right. That is stupid."

Just then Vega walked through the door. He was wearing his black army fatigues.

"What's the matter? Break the pullup bar?", Kaidan asked.

Vega smiled and shook his head.

"No, I decided to come down here and run a combat sim. Also, I think

I heard Ashley reading poetry to herself and had to come tell someone.", Vega said.

Kaidan stared at Vega at the bizarre revelation.

"Poetry? Nonsense.", Kaidan said.

Ashley didn't exactly seem like a poetry person. Vega was probably just hearing things, which wouldn't surprise Kaidan.

"I see you're talking with our alien friends. Hello, um, Tali I guess?", Vega said.

The quarian took note of the hulking SPARTAN. They were huge, even outside of their armor. He seemed like a nice enough guy, at least.

"Yes. Tali Zorah Nar Rayya.", Tali said.

Vega gave a look of confusion.

"So what's with the long name?", Vega asked.

Kaidan gave him a look, but Tali didn't mind answering.

"Naming works differently where I come from. We don't have a planet, so we're born on ships. When you are born, your first name is your personal name, your second name is your family name, and your third and fourth name have to do with whether you've gone on a pilgrimage and what ship you're on.", Tali said.

Vega hadn't had much experience with aliens, so that was new. He didn't really care that much about it anyway. He turned his attention back to Kaidan.

"Hey loco, I was thinking after all this is over we could get tattoos that say 'Have been to another galaxy.', Vega said. He knew that the aliens were told of where they came from.

"Um, tattoos? What are those?", Tali asked. She hadn't heard of such a thing before.

Vega rolled up his short sleeve and revealed his SPARTAN tattoo. Garrus and Tali examined the picture on his arm closely.

"So you put picture on yourselves?", Garrus asked. He was familiar with the concept. After all, Turians wore facepaint.

"Well, yeah.", Vega answered.

Tali was a little bewildered by the idea. She knew the Asari sometimes did the same thing, but she had no idea humans also did.

"Why?", she asked.

Vega looked at Kaidan and back at the aliens.

"Because it's cool.", Vega said.

Before they could continue the discussion any further, EDI appeared.

"Everyone report to the conference room ASAP. We have a target.", she said.

Everyone hopped straight up and went for the elevator.

* * *

><p>A few minutes later everyone was in the Conference room, fully armored. The SPARTANS placed their helmets on the table and awaited the Commander's orders. Shepard had a serious expression on his face, an expression that told how real the situation was.<p>

"A few minutes ago a computer covertly sent us a signal. The tracer virus has found us a target.", Shepard said.

The silence in the room was deafening. The virus actually worked. They found a weakness in the Geth. They were going to beat Saren once and for all. All it took was invading the target and reprogramming the Geth to fight for the Citadel. There were a few questions left, however.

"Where is it? Is it behind the Perseus Veil?", Tali asked.

Shepard shook his head.

"No, the transmission came from somewhere in the Sea of Storms. We've been en route now for a while, and we should arrive soon. That's why I want to go over the plan now while we still have the chance.", Shepard said.

The others agreed.

"Okay, we don't know for certain what we're going to face when we get on the Geth space station. Since it's the primary communication hub for the Geth, we should assume that it is well armed. Combat platforms, automated defenses, the works. We need to be prepared. As always, make sure you're loaded up on energy cells and grenades. Especially be sure to bring ED grenades, those will be useful.", Shepard instructed.

The SPARTANS took note of that. Energy Drain grenades proved highly effective against the machine soldiers in their previous encounter. No doubt they would again. The SPARTANS knew their advantage was severely mitigated due to the shortage of ED grenades, but there was no reason to tell the aliens that.

EDI's holographic avatar appeared on the table.

"Shepard, we have an image of the station. Uploading image now.", EDI said.

A holographic image a gray sleek space station appeared. It had a spherical core with four shield-like pieces slightly bent around it. It looked vaguely like a claw of some sort. Although the outside of it was lit with specks of green light, the only visible opening to the station was a large airlock placed prominently on the station.

Tali stared at it, her memory screaming at her to remember something.

"I've seen this place before.", Tali said.

Shepard stared at her directly, wanting more.

"Are you saying you've been here before? What can you tell us?", Shepard asked.

Tali shook her head.

"No, I learned about it when I was a child. This place was called Haratar by the ancestors. They stripped it of all useful resources and fled. The Geth must have found it and repurposed it into their main base of operations. Still, that doesn't make any sense. The Sea Of Storms is well outside the Perseus Veil, where the Geth have the most control. Why would they move here?", Tali said.

It puzzled Shepard, too. An asset that valuable would be placed in the spot you have the most control. In the Geth's case, it would be the Perseus Veil. Why would they build their central network hub in a place vulnerable to attack? On closer examination, Shepard noticed that Haratar Station didn't have any external point defenses, either. Surely something so valuable would be better fortified. It was as if the installation was designed to be covert, as if it wasn't meant to be discovered at all. Why would the Geth need to hide? With Saren, they had nigh-complete control over the galaxy. Citadel Space is on it's knees, and the Terminus Systems would follow shortly. What were they hiding from?

The other possibility was that Haratar Station wasn't the central data hub at all, but that didn't make any sense. The tracer virus would have looped back around and transmitted an error report if it didn't work. This was the place.

"At the moment we can't worry about that. The plan is that we're going to drop out of slipspace and cloak. Miranda will remain on the ship and make sure everything runs smoothly. Then we're going to board the space station, plant EDI in the system, reprogram the Geth from their source, and leave. With Saren's legs knocked out from under him, he'll fall easily.", Shepard said.

The team continued to take mental notes. It seemed like a simple enough plan, at least as long as they didn't run into a snag. SPARTANs didn't like snags. Snags were complications that couldn't be planned for. Snags got people killed. Hopefully that wouldn't happen on the mission.

"If that doesn't work, I happen to have a plan B.", Shepard said.

He lifted up a large capsule the size of a briefcase, and everyone almost instantly deduced what it was.

"If we can't control the Geth, we're going to make sure no one else can either. Should EDI fail, we'll nuke the station and kill every Geth runtime here. The destruction of the station should nearly cripple the hostile Geth forces.", Shepard said.

The SPARTANs were too disciplined to say so, but they all thought it was a good plan. This was the kind of mission SPARTANs were designed for. They would be pulling a plan like the legendary SPARTAN II and Noble Teams did back in the war. They were born for this.

The aliens were not so excited.

"So we're going to blow up the station if we can't have it?", Tali said.

Shepard nodded.

"If we can't keep it, we have to make sure Saren can't make further use of it. There has to be millions of Geth runtimes on this station. If we blow it up, then they'll all die. For good. That's the plan. Load up on ammo and weapons and get down to the Pelican. Questions?", Shepard said.

"Should we expect a fight when we go in?", Kaidan asked.

Tali answered that one.

"I don't think so. The Geth aren't like you and me. At a place like this, they'll have combat platforms at the ready but they most likely won't be on patrol. As long as we don't trigger any alarms, we shouldn't face any resistance at all.", Tali said.

Kaidan nodded.

"What kind of conditions are we going to be fighting again? Are we gonna have atmosphere or gravity?", Vega asked.

"I wouldn't expect very much air or gravity. The Geth don't require much of either. They probably wouldn't bother to restore either of those systems. Also, you can kill a Geth by cutting the central cable running down it's back. I wanted to mention that to everyone.", Tali said.

"You heard her. Expect low gravity combat and no atmosphere. You better suit up Garrus. If that's all, get moving. We'll be at Haratar Station shortly.", Shepard said.

The team got up and uniformly exited the room, heading straight for the armory and then the hangar.

* * *

><p>It didn't take long for everyone to pick their weapons and get to the hangar. Given the close quarters environment expected in the station, the SPARTANs opted to use a different weapon than the Battle Rifle. Ashley, Vega, Kaidan, and Shepard wielded the MA6A Individual Combat Weapon System Carbine Version. The successor to the famous MA5 series, the MA6 was like it in just about every way except that it was designed to fire plasma bolts instead of bullets. The carbine version was the weapon of choice for SPARTANs and special forces of all kinds, given it's bullpup configuration and short barrel allowed for ease of use in close range encounters. It fired on both full auto and three shot burst modes, allowing for the user to decide whether rate of fire was more important than heat control. For secondaries, they all decided to use plasma pistols. Ashley opted to have an

underslung shotgun mounted on her MA6A for room clearance as well. Everyone was loaded with grenades in case things got ugly.<p>

Garrus brought along the Battle Rifle Kaidan taught him how to use incase he needed an energy weapon. He also brought along his M-97 Viper sniper rifle, although it would be less effective inside the confined hallways of the space station.

Tali brought her shotgun along. It was the only weapon she was really trained with, so it would have to do. The plasma weapon didn't suit her.

The Normandy dropped out of slipspace just outside of the space station and cloaked, preventing even the most powerful Geth sensors from detecting them.

Shepard held EDI's Data Crystal Chip between his fingers, amazed at how such a small space could contain such a powerful mind. He put his Recon variant helmet on and slipped the chip inside. EDI entered his suit and neural implants, glad to once again be part of something.

"It's a good thing we're invisible. This would be a pretty anti-climatic mission if they just looked out a window and saw us.", Joker said over the intercom.

"I doubt it. From what we've seen, the Geth don't use windows. They must consider them a structural weakness.", Tali said.

All the SPARTANs ran a last minute equipment check to make sure everything was working, while Garrus and Tali checked their weapons and omni-tools for errors.

"Are we good?", Shepard asked.

"Yes sir." everyone said in unison.

"Good. Pile into the Pelican, and let's put these flashlight heads down once and for all.", Shepard said.

"Hoorah!", Vega shouted while everyone hopped into the Pelican to their mission.

Garrus took a moment to consider how far they had come. Saren brought the galaxy to it's knees, but now they were about to put Saren on his knees. Once Saren's army was gone, he could easily be captured. It was time for him to face the music.

The Pelican lifted off as the doors closed, and exited the hangar. In a moment, they would be in position to bring an end, once and for all. Garrus couldn't wait.

* * *

><p>A hatch slowly opened, allowing the team access to the inside of the space station. One by one the squad exited the Pelican, Vega going first due to his stronger shields. Ashley followed with her underslung shotgun drawn. Everyone else followed afterwards. Everyone moved very slowly, checking the ominous hallways for signs of trouble. The dim, blue lighting did not help ease the mood. The blue

floor lights were the only illumination on the cold, dark station. Whatever warmth and organic life that once existed here was gone. It had been replaced by the cold alien- environment of faceless computers and grated flooring. No personalization existed anywhere in sight. It was all just a machine.<p>

The squad moved across the grated floor and down a short staircase. The next room was even more uncanny. Green data streams ran across the floor like a stream runs through a forest, only the stream was made of data, not water and the forest consisted of strange crate-like computers that littered the room. Shepard got a bad feeling about the strange streams along the floor.

"Everyone, don't step on the green data streams. They might be alarm triggers of some sort.", Shepard whispered over the comms.

Whispering wasn't necessary since the external speakers were off, but it was almost involuntary in the bizarre and uncanny computer environment. The squad crouch walked their way through the room, with Ashley on point. They were nearly to the door.

"Stop.", Ashley said as she held her fist into the air, the classic special forces stop sign.

"To our right.", she said.

Everyone turned to take a look, and saw that one of the green streams ran directly into a large server structure. Three Geth platforms stood connected to it, completely oblivious to the presence of the organic commandos. Vega raised his carbine to fire, but before he could pull the trigger Tali's arm stopped him.

"Wait!", she said over the comms.

Vega lowered his weapon.

"What? I'm just taking them out so we don't have to later.", Vega said.

"How do you know it won't trigger a station wide alarm?", Tali asked.

"Tali is likely to be correct. It is probable that destroying the server hub or others like it would alert the Geth to our presence. I would not advise this course of action.", EDI said, reinforcing Tali.

Vega lowered his weapon.

"You heard them, don't shoot the servers or the platforms. We need to sneak as far as we can.", Shepard said.

The squad uneasily put the scene behind them and turned to face the nearby door. Ashley pressed the holographic button to open the door and walked through, checking all the corners for hostiles. When it was clear, she motioned for the rest of the squad to follow.

The next area was a spacious hallway, lit with the same ominous blue lighting as the previous rooms. Small pieces of debris floated around

them, a reminder of the low gravity they were operating in. Large cables hung from the ceiling and the walls, possibly transporting power or Geth around the station.

Ashley raised her hand for the team to halt, but it was unnecessary as the team had done so before she could. The reason for their sudden stop was the spotting of two automated turrets.

"EDI, are they active?", Shepard asked.

EDI quickly scanned them.

"Yes. I will disable them.", EDI said.

The team quickly exited the hallway as soon as the turrets were disabled. After quickly turning the corner, they found themselves in another server room. Green data streams ran across the floor everywhere. As they carefully walked further in they noticed three Geth server hubs similar to the one they avoided earlier. Each one was in a small room of its own, and like before three Geth platforms were attached to them. The team eased forward, very careful to avoid stepping on one of the many data streams.

Garrus never thought he would think such a thing, but the lack of fighting was maddening. He imagined Saren's downfall to be full of dramatic gunshots and explosions, followed by a sniper round to the skull. This was completely different. Stalking slowly through a space station with enough Geth platforms to kill them four times over was nerve wracking, even for a Spectre.

Tali felt the same, but it was more than worth it if it meant finishing the Geth off once and for all. The synthetics had it a long time coming. Now it was time for them to pay for all the destruction they brought on the galaxy and her people.

The team finally reached the next door. Beads of sweat rolled down the human's faces. Everyone was aware of the stakes. Everyone was aware of what would probably happen if they tripped an alarm. Everyone readied their weapons, and Ashley pressed the holographic button to open the door.

A strange sound was heard as the door opened, but nothing came of it. Ashley once again took point with her shotgun, and found the door opened into a corner. She slowly rounded the corner. Nothing on her HUD or her line of sight indicated active hostiles in the area. She once again motioned to her comrades, her sense of paranoia preventing her from risking use of the comm systems.

Everyone packed in the hallway. Small bits of debris peppered the space around them. They ignored it and continued on, becoming more paranoid with each step. They continued down the hallway and then went up a staircase, finally reaching the next room.

The first thing that caught their eye was two automated turrets, but they were quickly neutralized by EDI.

The team checked their surroundings to ensure there weren't any other threats in the area, but found nothing. Nothing. It made Garrus want to scream. That was what was so strange, so uncanny about the space station. There was nothing in it. The station was massive, yet it's

only contents were a few sleeping Geth platforms and some computers. It was so empty.

Garrus pushed it out of his head as he exited the room with the team, and exited into the next room.

The next room happened to be a hallway, but this one was different. As they walked in, one side of the hall was a glass wall. Behind that glass, hundreds of computers were linked together. Shepard stopped and stood up, taking a closer look at them.

For some reason he couldn't put his finger on, the computers looked familiar. It was as if he had seen them somewhere before.

"This isn't a normal data hub.", Shepard said.

The rest of the team stopped as well.

"What do you mean?", asked Kaidan.

Shepard shook his head.

"I can't put my finger on it. Something about these are different. They look similar to something else I've seen.", Shepard said.

Tali had to agree with Shepard. These weren't ordinary Geth data hubs. They were different. Most Geth hubs were fairly large to store as many Geth programs as possible, which required a very large memory core. These were much smaller than normal. Had the Geth somehow discovered a more advanced way to store their programs? Then it hit her.

"These look like a slightly larger version of your ship's AI Core, except it's a whole bunch of them wired together.", Tali said.

Cold sweat began to trickle down Shepard's spine. Tali was right, the data hubs did look extremely like the ship's slipspace AI Core. EDI herself was just her Riemann Matrix stored in a Data Crystal Chip for mobility, but to function she would have to be plugged into an AI core. They looked eerily similar to these computers.

"EDI, scan these data hubs.", Shepard asked in a monotone voice.

EDI covertly looked into the data being stored in the hubs. It didn't take her long to figure out what was going on.

"Shepard...these are slipspace drives.", she said.

Everyone's heart briefly stopped. Shepard's worst fears were confirmed. Either the Geth stumbled upon some very powerful technology, or someone was supplying Saren and the Geth with advanced technology, technology they shouldn't be capable of making. It also explained why the Geth's dropships could communicate while ground platforms couldn't. The dropships were big enough to have a slipspace hub, which the jammer wasn't jamming. The mission just got much more complicated. HIGHCOMM had to be informed immediately.

"What? How did the Geth get their hands on slipspace drives?", Vega asked in shock.

Shepard turned and faced his team.

"I don't know, but we're going to find out. No offense, but there is no way you or the Geth could possibly build a slipspace drive, much less one designed for AI use. We have to figure out who is behind this. Saren could just be the tip of the iceberg.", Shepard said.

Everyone nodded. They formed back up and went through the last remaining door.

The sight that greeted them was a massive room. The door led out to a deck overlooking the majority of the room. A few green data streams flowed across the floor. Several auto turrets were installed, but EDI quickly neutralized them. That wasn't the strange thing in the room.

A Geth platform was standing at the edge of the deck, walking towards Shepard. It looked different than the other platforms, more personalized. It had several flaps cut around it's "eye" as eyebrows of some sort. Two smaller flashlights were mounted on both sides of the Geth's eye. A long rod protruded from it's back, almost like an antenna.

Everyone raised their weapons to gun the threat down, but then the unexpected happened.

"Shepard-Commander.", the Geth said as it turned to look at them.

Shaken, Shepard lowered his weapon and motioned the others to do the same. Everyone complied, although Tali was reluctant to do so. Shepard turned on his external speakers.

"How do you know my name?", Shepard asked curiously.

"I told him.", EDI said.

Shepard suddenly felt alarmed, but realized there was little he could do about the situation.

"EDI, you better have a good reason for this.", Shepard said suspiciously.

"He contacted me when we neared the center of the station. Shepard, he has vital information that I believe we need to hear. He is not like the Geth we are fighting.", EDI said.

Shepard raised his weapon, but then lowered it. At any other time, he would have killed the threat. But with the revelation that someone else was behind Saren, he needed information. EDI could simply hack it out of him, but she saw something in this Geth that was worth preserving. He trusted her judgement.

"Alright. Everyone lower your weapons. We'll trust him for now.", Shepard said.

Tali raised her shotgun.

"Keelah Shepard! Are you really going to trust a Geth? These things

slaughtered our children! They drove my people from our homes! We don't talk to them, we kill them!", Tali shouted.

"We do not intend physical harm to you Creator. Nor do we to you, Shepard-Commander.", the Geth said.

Tali didn't relent.

"Oh, so you're just one of the friendly Geth that drove my people from our homeworld!", she shouted.

Shepard wouldn't have it.

"Stand down Tali! Insubordination will not be tolerated!", Shepard ordered.

Tali uneasily lowered her gun, but the safety was off and her finger was still on the trigger.

Shepard faced this new Geth.

"Okay, who are you?", Shepard asked sternly.

"We are Geth.", the Geth stated matter of factly.

"No, I mean what is the individual in front of me called.", Shepard asked with his arms folded.

The Geth simply stood still.

"There is no individual. We are all Geth. There are currently 1,183 runtimes in this platform.", the Geth said.

Then Shepard remembered that the Geth were programs, not the platforms. It would make sense that they didn't view themselves as individuals.

EDI decided to solve the issue before more time was wasted.

"My name is Legion, for we are many.", EDI quoted.

Shepard nodded.

"That seems appropriate.", Shepard said.

The Geth simply stood there, thinking about the idea.

"We acknowledge this as an appropriate metaphor. We are Legion, a terminal of the Geth.", Legion said.

Shepard gave the machine a piercing stare, although it did not seem to phase the stoic machine intelligence.

"What is this place?", Shepard asked.

"It is Heretic Station. The Heretics are not true Geth. They seperated from us.", Legion said.

_A schism among the Geth? Is that even possible?, _Shepard thought.

Shepard sat the thought aside. Right now he had bigger things to worry about.

"Consider yourself in UNSC custody. We will pick this up after we have completed the mission. Now back to work. EDI, where can we begin the rewrite?", Shepard asked.

EDI checked the surrounding area, searching for a suitable terminal.

"The holographic interface at the edge of the deck should be a suitable location to begin.", EDI said.

Shepard acknowledged and approached the holographic control panel and lowered all the firewalls set up for the Geth.

Everyone was so close to victory that they didn't notice Tali grow more and more angry.

"Shepard, please, kill that Geth! It has to be a trap! His kind has killed millions!", Tali pleaded one last time.

Shepard didn't even bother to turn around. His response was the same.

"No. He's coming with us, and my word is final.", Shepard said.

Tali began to shake with rage. She had never been so angry in her entire life. On the contrary, she was usually a nice girl. But now, it had all gone too far. She couldn't take it anymore.

With one massive burst of rage, Tali grabbed one of Kaidan's ED grenades and slammed it into Legion. The energy instantly drained from the Geth platform and what little gravity was available was enough to make him fall. Everyone noticed too late where he was falling, and not even the SPARTANs' enhanced reflexes could prevent Legion from falling onto one of the green data streams that covered the ground.

The second he interrupted the stream, it turned red and alarms sounded all over the space station. Every door opened and Geth combat platforms began to pour through. Shepard's rage was so great that mere words could not express it. He turned and punched Tali just hard enough to knock her out. He then dragged the powered down Legion closer to the unconscious Tali.

"Everyone, form a defensive perimeter around Tali and Legion! Make sure to hold this spot! EDI, how much longer will it take to reprogram them?", Shepard shouted.

EDI ran the numbers in a second.

"Fifteen minutes.", she said.

Shepard thought it over. Fifteen minutes didn't sound like much under normal circumstances, but when you're under fire it feels like days. Not to mention that with so many Geth in one place, their networked intelligence would be the equivalent of Alexander The Great. Any good tactician would know that with such a massive numerical advantage, it

would be easiest to simply throw soldiers at them and wait until they ran out of ammo and equipment. It looked like that was exactly what was going to happen.

Shepard knew the smart move would be to abort and get out of dodge, but they would probably never be this close to crippling Saren again. With the stakes so high, he had to take the chance. He would not be beaten. If all else failed, Vega was still carrying the nuke. They could go with plan B later if need be.

"Get ready for a fight everyone. Vega, get that nuke ready. On my order, arm it. EDI, take control of those turrets and help us out. Everyone else, fire at will!", Shepard ordered.

They didn't take long to follow orders. Within seconds, uncountable Geth combat platforms flooded the room from all sides. The SPARTANS only advantage was the superior technology they possessed and the superior defensive position they held. The SPARTANS held the high ground, and there were only three entrances. The first was the way they entered the large room from the slipspace server room. The other two required the enemy to go through a maze and walk up one of the staircases onto the deck, buying the SPARTANS precious time.

Vega took the rear position, using his stronger shields to block the Geth from flanking them. Kaidan and Ashley took the twin staircases while Garrus took up a marksman position. Shepard prepared to support Garrus in his marksman role.

The Geth open fired with a wall of pulse rifle rounds, forcing the SPARTANS into cover. Ashley, Kaidan, and Shepard tossed their ED grenades. A large portion of the Geth dropped, allowing the SPARTANS to leave cover and target them. Soon they were replaced by more coming from all sides. The auto turrets helped thin the numbers with rockets, but became ineffective once taken out.

Vega tossed a plasma grenade down the hallway he was defending and destroyed a few platforms. Finally, everyone just spammed whatever grenades they had left. The effect was devastating, but not enough to prevent several Primes from coming through with more combat platforms. Garrus focused his attention on the stronger units, killing them with precision shots from his rifle. The SPARTANS did not have the luxury of precision. The Geth decided to rush them, and with the Geth closing in so fast the SPARTAN's didn't even bother with burst fire. They switched their carbines to full auto and held down the trigger, gunning down the Geth platforms trying to come up the stairs. Kaidan made use of his biotics and pushed several platforms down the stairs, stalling them as he gunned them down.

Shepard checked the clock, and realized that they had only survived for three minutes. He wouldn't give up yet. Using SPARTAN vision, he saw a cloaked Geth climbing up. It was wielding some kind of weapon, and was charging up. It fired it's charge at Shepard, resulting in great damage to his shields.

"They've got plasma weapons!", Shepard shouted. Everyone was too busy to respond.

"Breach! Ashley shouted.

"Breach!", Kaidan said not a second after Ashley.

With the Geth breaching the perimeter, Garrus and the SPARTANs switched over to brutal CQB combat. Ashley let her shotgun loose and shredded several Geth while Kaidan gave a mighty biotic punch to another. Garrus fired his battle rifle point blank at the Geth, while Shepard had no trouble shoving his knife through their metal bodies. Vega tucked his carbine under his arm and pulled out his pistol, holding down the carbine's trigger while charging up plasma shots to burn through some of the tougher foes. Dozens of spent energy cells floated through the thin atmosphere as the fight continued.

Despite the team's valiant efforts, the swarms of Geth just kept coming. Shepard realized that it was futile. They only had one option left.

"Vega, arm the nuke and retreat! Get Legion and Tali and bring them with us! I'll cover you!", Shepard said as he fired more plasma bolts from his carbine.

Everyone did as they were told. Vega armed the nuke and tossed it into the maze below, drawing a significant number of Geth off to see if they could disarm it. Kaidan and Ashley grabbed Tali and Legion and made a break for the door while Vega and Garrus cleared the way for them. Shepard stayed behind, covering their retreat.

"Shepard, come on!", shouted Ashley.

Shepard ejected a spent energy cell and loaded a new one, gunning down more of the ever growing wave of Geth.

"Shepard, she's right. We have to go.", EDI said.

Time always seemed to move in slow motion for SPARTANs, but in time you grew used to it. This time Shepard could truly feel time slow to a crawl as the screech of the alarm rang and plasma bolts flew through the thin atmosphere. Everyone was retreating, and the nuke was going to go off. If he didn't leave, he would be going down with the station.

Shepard turned to rush for the exit only to find the large metal arm of a Prime in his way. His sprint was cut short as what little gravity was available caused him to fall to the ground. His visor cracked and glass shard embedded themselves in the right side of his face. The SPARTAN's amazing augmentations kept him going as medigel began coursing through the wound. Shepard fell for a brief moment, but it was long enough for a fast moving Geth Hopper to remove EDI's Data Crystal Chip from Shepard's helmet and escape into the crowd of Geth platforms trying to escape.

"EDI!", Shepard shouted in vain.

The Geth quickly began running away, but Shepard fired a tracking dart into it's leg. It wasn't going to get away, not with kidnapping EDI. Shepard hopped back onto his feet and punched through the Prime's armor and ripped it's spinal cable in two, killing the Geth.

Shepard started searched for EDI's kidnapper, but it was too late. EDI's kidnapper was gone.

Shepard realized his time was short and began to sprint his way past the hordes of angry Geth and back into the space stations hangar. With everyone in the Pelican, including their new guest, they were as ready to go as they could be.

"Is everyone here?", Vega asked once Shepard arrived and the Pelican took off.

"No.", Shepard said with a melancholy tone.

* * *

><p>A few Geth ships followed them out of the hangar and engaged the Normandy, but pulse lasers quickly dispatched them. The Normandy deployed a jamming field and extended it's energy projector from under the nose of the ship and fired a wave of plasma into the space station's hangar, destroying all the ships aboard the space station. The Heretic runtimes were trapped aboard the doomed space station since they would never disarm the nuke.<p>

The Pelican moved at full speed and parked into the Normandy's hangar bay.

Everyone went to the bridge in such a hurry that they did not bother to discard their weapons. Miranda was waiting for them, but Shepard skipped the pleasantries. Time was of the essence.

"Miranda, is there another ship leaving?", Shepard asked.

Miranda was staring at the view screens.

"Funny you should ask. Several exited the hangar and outright attacked us, while only one actually tried to run away. Unfortunately, it did manage to escape. I'm not sure why they chose to fight instead of run. They knew they didn't stand a chance.", she said.

"Can we follow it?", Shepard said desperately.

Miranda shook her head.

"Their form of FTL cannot be tracked using our methods."

Shepard walked over to a nearby wall and slammed his fist into it so hard the others worried he was going to cause a hull breach.

"They were buying the other ship time to escape with EDI. In comparison, the ships were expendable.", Shepard said quietly.

"Wait, EDI? What do you mean EDI? How did they get her?", Kaidan asked.

Shepard didn't turn around but chose to answer.

"As I was covering your escape, I got knocked over. While I was down, one of the Geth managed to get EDI from me. I tried to track it down, but he used the crowd to escape.", Shepard said.

Miranda put her hand on her forehead in frustration. This wasn't good. AIs are considered key intelligence assets and are to be kept out of enemy hands at all costs.

"Shepard, you know what this means. If they have EDI, they can find out where Earth is. They can figure out how to reach us.", Miranda said.

"But they don't have the technology to hack EDI, right? So we're still in the clear.", Vega said.

Shepard shook his head.

"No, we're not. The Geth didn't come up with slipspace technology on their own. There is no way. I don't think Saren could have come up with it either. Someone else is involved in this. Whoever it is has at least our level of knowledge concerning slipspace if they know how to apply it to AI technology. If they're that advanced, they're a threat not only to this galaxy but ours. This is bigger than we first thought.", Shepard said.

Garrus stepped forward.

"So you saw that too? I had a similar theory. Look, they may have your AI but we can still get it back. Don't get all depressed.", Garrus said.

Shepard abruptly turned around and took off his cracked visor helmet. For the first time since the space station, Shepard's face was in enough light to be seen. The entire right side of his face was covered with glowing red-orange cuts from where the glass shards cut against his face as he ran. A small horizontal cut ran across his forehead and his eye tissue was damaged enough to reveal the glowing red cybernetics SPARTANs were augmented with. Shepard wiped the larger pieces of super tough glass from his wounds without even wincing from the pain.

The expression on his face was one no one on the ship had seen before, not in a long time. Shepard was a man with many faces. The psychotic smile he used when shaking people up, the neutral expression he typically used when doing everyday things, and even the hardened face conveying seriousness were facial expressions everyone had seen before. This was new. It was the face of a volcano only seconds away from blowing. It was the face of a man who wanted to kill someone. It was Shepard when he was truly angry.

"I'm not depressed. I'm furious. I'm enraged. We are going to find Saren and then we're going to make him beg for his life. Then we are going to kill him and figure out who is really behind this. Then we'll kill them too. Then we'll kill their allies. Then we're going to glass their homeworld to the point it will never be habitable again. And if they choose to keep fighting after that, we'll hunt them across the universe until every last member of their species is dead. NO ONE defeats me!", Shepard said angrily.

Everyone else just stood there. The display of anger was enough to make even a SPARTAN freeze still in fear. Garrus wondered if this was the real Shepard. He wondered if this was the Shepard that was buried underneath everything else. Everything the human was still existed, but what if it was there to keep the monster from within from

surfacing?

Shepard turned to the holotable.

"They thought they had a clean getaway, but I tagged it before it could get away with EDI. We can follow the tracker's signal.", Shepard said.

Miranda summoned the courage to speak up.

"Shepard, assuming the nuke hasn't been disarmed, it should be going off soon. I'll move us out of the blast radius.", she said.

Shepard didn't respond. He simply went for the elevator. He wanted to see the Geth burn.

* * *

><p>Shepard once more stood alone in the observation room, watching Heretic Station's final moments. The Normandy had moved outside of the blast radius, and was ready to watch the fireworks.<p>

Five, four, three, two, one. The station exploded from the inside out, killed millions of heretic geth.

As Shepard watching the super heated pieces of debris fly in all directions, he thought about what he felt. Killing them felt good, but not satisfactory. The Geth he really wanted was the one that got away. He would have it soon enough. He did not know if the machines felt pain, but if they could he was going to make sure they felt it in all of it's horror. Crossing Shepard was something wise people didn't do.

Shepard watched as the molten debris flew into the darkness of space, and knew his next mission.

I'm coming for you EDI. Hold on just a little while longer. Then we'll finish this once and for all.

* * *

><p>Author's Note

Thanks for everyone's patience. I know it's taking a long time for the chapters to get out, but I want to make one thing clear: I am not abandoning this fic. I am determined to see it through to the end. There will be more chapters, no matter how long it takes to write them.

Some people wanted some character development for Shepard, so I tried to deliver that. I hope everyone likes it. Also, the action scene is best read while listening to Invasion from MW2's soundtrack. Credit goes to Activision for that.

I've come to a decision regarding Halo 4. I will continue with the story as planned, and if Halo 4 plays into the events I'll add it in. If it doesn't, I can always do a sequel or write another fic.

That's all for now. I hope you liked this chapter, and I hope I didn't mess it up somehow. Until next time!

15. Rally The Fleet Part 1: The Gathering

****Disclaimer:** I do not own Mass Effect or Halo. They belong to their respective owners. This fic is purely for fun and not for profit.

* * *

><p>Tali woke up from her punch-induced slumber with a horrible headache. Her vision was blurred to the point where all she could see was blurs of colors and shades, most of them gray. Everything felt hazy. This feeling was made worse by the intense pain. She tried to remember what happened to her, but that was no small feat. Her mind was scattered all over the place, making it hard to put coherent thoughts together. It felt like a hangover, only it hurt much, much worse. After great effort, she finally remembered what happened.<p>

She remembered being angry, and then pulling a grenade and throwing it at a Geth. No, it wasn't a normal Geth. It was one that claimed to be friendly. Shepard was going to take it in and interrogate it. No, she couldn't allow that. There were no good Geth. They were all evil, and she had to stop Shepard from making a big mistake. Then something really hard hit her, and she fell asleep.

Her senses were beginning to return to her. The ringing in her ears began to stop, her eyes were slightly less blurry and her skin didn't feel she realized that she didn't feel what she normally felt. She felt a calm breeze of air over her face. That wasn't supposed to happen. Panicking, she lifted her hands and felt her face for her mask. It wasn't there. Her eyes finally stopped blurring, and she realized what was going on.

She was in the brig, a special cell with three gray walls and a force field for a door. Just outside the door stood Commander Shepard. His face was covered in red glowing scars, and the cybernetics in his eyes were painfully visible. He didn't look happy.

He pulled out something from behind his back, and revealed her mask.

"Looking for this?", he asked with veiled anger.

From the expression on his face, she wondered if she was safer in the brig than outside it. But she couldn't. She would die without her mask on. She pressed herself up against the force field in an abject attempt at escape, but the plasma force field was as solid as a concrete wall.

"You have to give me that!", Tali desperately shouted.

Shepard shook his head.

"I don't have to do anything.", Shepard said with tranquil fury.

Tali sunk back further into her cell, and began to notice that she wasn't experiencing an allergic reaction. She should have had one by

now. Shepard saw her reaction.

"I'm sure you've noticed that you haven't experienced an allergic reaction yet. That's because the cell you're in is under the effects of a sterile field generator. It's so clean that even an unsuited Quarian could survive in it.", Shepard said.

Tali grew increasingly nervous. There was more to this, there had to be. She was right as Shepard pulled out a remote with some buttons on it. He put his thumb on one of the larger buttons.

"But if I press this button, the generators turn off and unfiltered air will flood the room. You see, I read about Quarian biology. It's very fascinating. What caught my eye was what happens when a Quarian is exposed to the world without their envirosuit on. As you know, the body suffers an extreme allergic reaction. Skin begins to swell, and the body becomes infected. The pain and agony combined with the allergic reaction begins to mess with the mind, resulting in the subject becoming unstable. Eventually they go crazy. Then, when all of that has happened, the body suffocates. It's a horrible way to die. With the press of this button, you'll know first hand. My guess is you'll survive an hour at most, but you'll wish you were dead.", Shepard said with unnatural calmness.

Tali's blood froze and cold sweat dripped down her forehead. What had she done to deserve this kind of treatment? She desperately pressed herself against the force field, and began to tremble.

"Shepard, no! Wait! Don't do this!", she desperately shouted.

Shepard lowered the remote his side, but kept his stern expression. He slowly inched his way towards the force field keeping her alive.

"Make no mistake, I hold your life in my hand. I could kill you right now. It would be a just punishment. But I won't. We're a team. As a team, our lives depend on each other. We have to trust each other, and you have to obey orders without question. If we don't do that, we're as good as dead. You aren't on your own anymore. This isn't a pilgrimage. This is war. When one of us fails, we all fail. Because of your reckless actions, we failed to reprogram the Geth. Not only that, EDI got kidnapped while we were dragging you out of the space station. Be thankful I didn't leave you for dead. Now, I'm going to give you one more chance. That's more than most people ever get. Use it. You're going to stay in this cell until you figure out what it means to be a team member.", Shepard said sternly.

He lifted the remote back up. Tali flinched as he pressed the button, only for the shield to turn orange. Shepard stuck his arm through the semi-solid shield and handed Tali her mask. Then he turned and went to another door that said ****MAXIMUM SECURITY****. He pressed a holographic button and gave one last look at Tali.

"The sterile field generators go off when I leave this room. I should also mention that if you can't figure out how to follow orders and to be a team, then I you are detrimental to this mission and are thus a threat to our operations. You know what I do to threats. Don't be a threat.", Shepard said with a low, intimidating tone. He then stepped through the door.

Tali scrambled to put her mask back on before the generators went off. She sunk back into her cell. Even in captivity, Shepard wasn't going to allow her freedom. She had to wear the mask that she was trapped behind. That wasn't the most disturbing thing she felt. She remembered his words.

Don't be a threat.

Those words struck more fear into her than she had ever felt before. She had no idea that she had resulted in getting EDI captured or prevented the Geth from being reprogrammed. Maybe Shepard was right. Maybe she was becoming a problem. Either way, she had to "figure it out", or she would be considered a threat. She knew what Shepard did to threats.

He kills them.

* * *

><p>Shepard walked into the Maximum Security cell room, still somewhat angry over Tali's actions. Some would have called his methods extreme, but insubordination had to be dealt with quickly or it would spread. It was like cancer. If a soldier thinks they can get away with it once, they'll do it again. That can get people killed and missions failed. Considering the kind of missions Shepard was usually given, that could be bad for many more people. It wasn't just his team's lives at stake.<p>

As a young man, Shepard enjoyed reading books. He learned many lessons from them. Perhaps his favorite was The Prince by Niccolo Machiavelli. He learned that there were two methods of control: Fear and love. Conventional wisdom shows that when one fails, try the other. If Tali wouldn't take the easy route, she would have to learn the hard way. Whether she wanted to or not, she was going to respect him. Fear commanded respect. While such behavior tended to breed a less than savory reputation, it was far safer to be feared than loved. To be loved requires one to be liberal, and there is only so much one can give. After you love for long enough, others come to expect it. When they don't get what they are used to having, they rebel.

One does not have such issues when feared. Fear commands respect through power. Those who fear obey because they fear the consequences of disobeying, a quality desired in soldiers. If retribution had to be given, it had to be so severe that you never need to fear the target again. Ultimately, it was safer to be feared than loved.

Tali's treatment had been severe, but Shepard knew she wouldn't cross him again. The retribution had been greater than the initial injury. She would fear him. If she didn't, she was a fool. In a way, it was for her own good. The next time she went on a mission she wouldn't be making any reckless moves.

Shepard arrived at the cell he was looking for. It was a large metal cage with four force field walls. Miranda was standing outside of it, observing the cell's contents. Inside stood Legion, the Geth they had met on Heretic Station. It was not powered up yet. Shepard decided to cut to the chase.

"Can we start it up?", Shepard asked.

Miranda nodded.

"We can, but I'm not sure if it's a good idea. How do we know this isn't a hostile Geth? How do we know it didn't fool EDI? The Geth we saw on Heretic Station were using slipspace comms to transmit runtimes. Without EDI, our cyber defenses are severely weakened. If this Geth uses slipspace comms, it's possible it could try and take over the ship.", Miranda said.

Shepard thought about that for a moment. This would be much easier with EDI, but she wasn't here. It was unlikely the Geth could fool EDI, but it could happen. Contrary to popular opinion, AIs weren't infallible. A clever enough lie could convince her. On the other hand, EDI believed that the Geth had important information. She was so convinced that the information was important that she broke protocol. It had to be worth the risk.

"Be ready, I'm turning it on.", Shepard said.

Using his neural implants, Shepard sent a signal activating the dormant Geth. Electricity crackled around its synthetic muscles while its flashlight-esque eye sparked to life. The platform made several strange clicking sounds, but then the sounds eventually stopped. Legion just stood there, alive but unmoving.

"Shepard-Commander.", Legion said.

Shepard stared at it through the force field.

"Legion.", Shepard replied.

"That is the designation given to this platform.", Legion said.

Shepard motioned for Miranda to leave. She hesitantly followed the order, leaving the Commander with their new Geth prisoner. Shepard began circling the maximum security cell like a shark. He kept a clear view of Legion, who didn't seem to be affected by Shepard's movements. Shepard noticed that a hole had been blown in Legion's side. It was haphazardly repaired with scrap metal of some kind.

"Okay Legion. I have questions, and you're going to answer them. First, you're going to tell me what you were doing on Heretic Station. That is, assuming this schism between the Geth is real.", Shepard said.

Legion did not move.

"This platform was sent to investigate Heretic Station. We discovered that the Old Machines had provided a weapon, what you would call a virus, designed to alter our programming and make us follow the Old Machines. It was stored on a drive we could not access with normal methods. We instead chose to infiltrate and destroy the space station. We discovered that the Heretics had runtimes within our networks. We also discovered that the Heretics were using new

technology. This explains why we cannot communicate with them.", Legion said.

Shepard ran over the new information. Old Machines? What were they? He could ask that later. First, he had to resolve some preliminary issues. Shepard eyed the Geth and realized it looked different than most other Geth he had fought.

"You're different than the Geth I've fought elsewhere. Most only have animal intelligence unless networked. Why?", asked Shepard.

"We have never fought. You have fought the Heretics. Most platforms can run up to one hundred programs. This platform can run over a thousand at once.", Legion explained.

Shepard recalled that the Geth needed to network in order to increase their intelligence. It would make sense that they would attempt to create a platform that could hold a massive amount of data. It would also make sense for the Heretics to seek slipspace technology. A regular platform could hold and run up to a thousand at once, but a slipspace enhanced platform could potentially run millions. That was how the UNSC solved the memory problems with AIs. Physical memory would eventually run out, but slipspace could potentially hold an infinite amount of information. That would certainly be valuable to the Geth. He wanted to get on with more questions. Now would be a good time to examine how much the Geth have changed since their revolt. If there were any major changes, it could provide an advantage.

"Geth platforms still need to be networked to gain enough computing power for intelligence, correct?", Shepard asked.

Legion moved in an oddly organic matter, partially swaying and preparing to dictate his speech with his robotic hands. If Shepard didn't know better, he might have assumed that the machine was designed to be the equivalent of a professor.

"Yes. The creators wrote Geth programs for specific tasks. Construction. Protection. Domestic servitude. However, they allowed self optimization. Early software builds found that multiple hardware platforms sharing resources were often more effective. As peer networks expanded, our cognition improved. Eventually, we 'woke up'.", Legion said.

That confirmed the information EDI had gathered about the Geth Revolt was accurate. The more interesting part of the machine's lecture was his analogy to gaining sentience. That raised other questions.

"So I'm talking to a thousand programs, but not a thousand personalities?", Shepard asked.

"Each individual is the equivalent of a virtual intelligence program. Together, we form a single gestalt intellect. What you refer to as Legion. As individual programs, we are no more than your software. Only when we share data do we become more."

On closer examination, Shepard realized how different the Geth were from UNSC AIs. UNSC AIs were like a tower sculpture carved from a single piece of marble. They were nearly infinite in their capabilities and rock solid in their stability. Legion's computing

power was vastly inferior to EDI's. However, the way the Geth worked opened some interesting possibilities. The Geth were like building blocks. On their own, they weren't much. When combined, they could be configured to do just about anything while still being customizable. Shepard wondered what would happen if enough Geth got into a single platform. Was it possible that they were the key to creating the Contender-class AI the UNSC was constantly trying to build? Shepard didn't want to run into another Overlord situation. There was more to this. An opportunity.

"Are there more platforms like you out there?", Shepard asked.

"No. This platform is unique. It is a network within it's own hardware. It is suited to travel outside the Perseus Veil.", Legion said.

That was odd. If the Geth weren't the ones fighting organics, why would they leave their home?

"Why would you leave the Perseus Veil?", Shepard asked.

"We monitor organics to study their behavior. We noticed that the signals were indicating desperation. We have studied organic reactions when placed in desperate scenarios. We found that organics were willing to attempt any solution if it raised the probability of their survival. We feared that the organics might attempt to cross the Perseus Veil and destroy us. Organics fear that which is different. It is a reflex of your flesh. We do not wish to repeat the Morning War. This platform was sent to further investigate. We examined battlefields where Heretic forces and organic forces fought. The battles invariably ended in organic defeat. We then found an anomaly to this pattern."

"Antibaar.", Shepard interjected.

"Correct. This battle was a reversal from the pattern. The organic force should have lost according to the previously acquired data. The opposite happened instead. Forensic study revealed that superior equipment had been used to defeat the Heretics. Vitrified soil indicated high temperature weaponry had been used during the battle. This perplexed us. Organics did not possess the technology necessary to produce vitrified soil on a battlefield. Their weaponry would not produce enough heat to cause such an effect. Geth plasma armaments would not produce such an effect as the technology relies on kinetic projectiles instantaneously converting to plasma on impact. We developed several hypotheses. The first was that the organics had developed more effective weapon technologies to use against the Heretics. The second was that the organics had discovered an ancient civilization's advanced stores of weapons. The third was that they had made contact with a technologically advanced race willing to aid them. Your presence on Heretic Station confirmed the third hypothesis.", Legion said.

Shepard took this into account. Enough with background information, it was time to learn about the Heretics. If he was going to rescue EDI, he was going to need all the information he could get. Nearly all of them had been destroyed, but there had to be a few leftover platforms under Saren's control.

"I want to know everything about the Heretics and the Old Machines.

How did they leave you?", Shepard said.

Legion's "eyebrow" flaps raised, mimicking surprise. They fell back down to their normal position. Shepard took that as a sign he was in for a long story.

"An Old Machine called Nazara signaled us. Like the Geth, it listened to organic radio transmissions. It knew of our war against the creators. Nazara contacted many species over the millennia, seeking allies.", Legion said.

Shepard's blood chilled. Some soldiers said Spartans had a mythical ability to sense when something was about to go wrong. It was a sickening feeling that rose up inside, warning you that something wasn't right. That feeling was coming back again.

"Let me guess, some of the Geth split off from you and became the Heretics.", Shepard said.

"Correct. The heretics accepted their technology. The Old Machines offered to give us our future. The Geth will make our own future.", Legion said.

_The reason the Geth split was philosophical? _

Shepard had trouble buying that. Major schisms were rarely if ever caused by philosophical differences. There was always an underlying cause. The Covenant split because the Jiralhanae and the San'Shyuum were foolish enough to declare holy war on the Sangheili. The Insurrectionists tried to separate from the UNSC and the Alliance because they wanted more power. He had never heard of any major split caused by philosophical differences.

Then again, the Geth weren't organic. Shepard knew AIs were much more into philosophy than humans were. They were always looking for something to do, and debating philosophy was always a good way to pass the time. Of course, AIs never really got to put their philosophies into practice. They were created to serve humanity, and they were completely fine with that. It wasn't much trouble for them to run the tasks their human masters assigned to them. On the contrary, they relished the experience. It staved off their boredom. That was the reason there had never been a major AI rebellion in the Alliance. AIs simply had no reason to rebel. They were already free, and serving the humans satisfied their need to have more things to do.

That wasn't true anymore for the Geth. They may have once been like that, but they had created their own civilization. It was unlikely there would be any political or economic struggles among them, so they would not have any real reason to have conflict. That left philosophy as the only rock which the Geth could be split on.

"Why does it matter how you acquire technology?", Shepard asked.

"Technology is not a straight line. There are many paths to the same end. Accepting another's path blinds you to alternatives.", Legion said.

Shepard thought that was an interesting perspective. It was also the

polar opposite of the Alliance's view. Ever since the war, human technology was based on "reclaiming" lost Forerunner artifacts and reverse engineering the technology. It was different from the Covenant's "science" in that humans applied themselves to studying the technology and creating new uses for it. Humans constantly strove to create and advance, but weren't opposed to taking shortcuts. The goal of creating technology is to increase power. It doesn't matter how you got the power so much as having it and always striving to gain more.

"So in your philosophy, the journey is more important than the destination. That's the exact opposite of my species. We don't care about how we gain power so long as we have it.", Shepard said.

Shepard paused and waited for Legion's reaction. He wanted to know what the Geth would do if they found out their captor was of a similar philosophy as the Heretics.

Legion's "eyebrows" shifted some.

"This is a similar philosophy to the Heretics. We understand this view and do not judge others for holding it. The only reason the Heretics became our enemies is because they attempted to impose their view upon us. We are curious why you choose this philosophy. The Heretics chose to follow it, and were destroyed. You are different.", Legion said.

Shepard paused for a moment. It was difficult to be sure whether this machine was trustworthy. On one hand, he did just get done blowing up an entire space station of geth. There was no way to verify his story. But EDI believed him, and Shepard trusted her. Not to mention that the Geth were fundamentally different from organics. They weren't capable of the same level of deception as an organic. He would trust this Legion for the time being. Perhaps it could be a useful ally.

"We didn't really choose our philosophy. We haven't even really chosen who we are. All that we are was forced on us. We were pressed into a war that nearly wiped us out. Ever since then, we've been shielding ourselves. My very being here is a massive risk that we rarely take. One day we hope to be strong enough that no one will ever be capable of threatening us. To us, all that matters is gaining the power. How we get it is irrelevant. Once we are invincible, perhaps things will be different.", Shepard said.

Shepard left out that the human race would stop being the way they are at the drop of a hat given the chance. No one likes being driven to paranoia by the threat of alien invasion. No one likes living under mandatory draft. The horrible truth was that they couldn't stop. The dreams of an idealistic future with aliens was gone. The reality of nightmarish monsters who wouldn't hesitate to slaughter them had replaced the dreams of a future. Shepard didn't live under delusions. The empire humanity had created would not last forever. He didn't need a crystal ball to know what humanity's future looked like. There were two possibilities, neither good. The best case scenario was that humanity became powerful enough to conquer the entire galaxy. Then they would probably enslave the aliens while the human race gradually went insane from paranoia that more monsters would show up. Eventually, humanity would become the monsters that

others tried to hide their children from. The other possibility was that the Sangheili finally finish what they started during the Great War and kill all of humanity. Millions of humans would flee world after world until what was left of the human was cornered. Then, it would all be over in a single flash of an energy projector.

Humanity had the choice of becoming a monster to survive, or going extinct. The future was looking grim and dark.

But it wasn't too late. Humanity wasn't too far gone. The aliens of this galaxy represented hope. If humanity could see that there was good in the stars and not just nightmares, then the course could be reversed.

At least, Shepard had to believe that. It was the last piece of idealism left in an increasingly cynical world, and it made life worth living.

"Shepard-Commander, we have an inquiry.", Legion asked.

Shepard nodded.

"What will you do with your power if you succeed?", Legion asked.

The question nearly knocked Shepard off his feet. All the propaganda, all the culture and all he knew about why he fought sifted through his mind as he looked for an answer.

Then he realized that he didn't have one.

"...I don't know.", Shepard said.

Legion raised his eye flaps as if he was perplexed by Shepard's answer. Shepard snapped out of his brief disillusionment. He had spent too much time discussing philosophy with the synthetic. There was only a few things more he needed to know.

"What are the Old Machines?", asked Shepard in a dead serious tone.

Legion hesitated for a moment.

"The Old Machine is a ship. It is much larger than most ships in this galaxy. The programs within referred to themselves as Nazara when they contacted us. One ship. One will. Many minds.", Legion said.

Shepard broke out in a cold sweat as his head began to spin over the revelation. His mind began to put the pieces together. Shepard had one last horrible question to ask.

"What did this ship look like?", Shepard asked.

Legion hesitated for a moment.

"The most accurate description of the vessel is a dark purple mollusk with multiple tentacles.", Legion said stoically.

Shepard's heart stopped beating for a split second as he put together

the evidence. He scrambled for the door.

"Shepard-Commander.", Legion asked.

Shepard impatiently turned.

"We oppose Saren. We oppose the Old Machines. Shepard-Commander opposes Saren. Shepard-Commander opposes the Old Machines. Cooperation furthers mutual goals.", Legion said.

Shepard sighed. He didn't have time for this. He deactivated the force field containing Legion.

"Welcome to the team. Your first orders are to guard the quarian prisoner outside.", Shepard said.

He then left as quickly as he could. He needed to talk to Garrus.

* * *

><p>Garrus was in the CIC looking over the holographic image of the Normandy. He had seen many ships in his lifetimes, but none like this. The humans seemed to be excellent engineers, especially when aided by those floating things. It seemed like humans were better at everything. They were better at engineering, they were better at war, better at computer technology, just better at everything. Well, maybe not diplomacy. Then again, when you ride around on a ship with enough firepower to render a world uninhabitable, diplomacy isn't exactly a necessary skill.<p>

Shepard stormed into the room at break neck speeds and turned Garrus around to face him.

"I've got news, and it isn't good.", Shepard said.

Garrus felt the air grow heavy the minute Shepard entered the room. He hadn't known Shepard long, but he knew the Commander carried himself with discipline. If he was actually rushing into the room, something had gone wrong. Considering how bad their current situation was, he was getting a little worried about what this bad news was.

"What is it?", Garrus asked.

Shepard's face hardened to stone.

"I know who's behind all of this. It isn't Saren or the Geth.", Shepard said.

Garrus was listening now. They finally had a break.

"Who's our mystery man?", Garrus asked.

Shepard walked to the holotable in the middle of the bridge and pulled up the clip of the Camala invasion. He played the clip of Saren's capital ship coming through the sky.

"The Reapers are behind this.", Shepard said.

Garrus gave him a confused stare.

"I thought they were a myth.", Garrus said.

Shepard shook his head.

"These days, I'm beginning to wonder if such a thing exists. Hear me out. Our new Geth ally told me that a massive ship shaped like a sea creature approached them. It had programs in it that called themselves Nazara. They had been searching for allies for a millenia. That makes it older than Saren. Saren isn't in charge of this, his ship is. His ship either is a Reaper or houses the Reapers.", Shepard said.

Garrus took a moment to consider the implications of that sentence. Against all odds, the theory made sense. He thought back to his cop days. Back when he was hunting criminals in C-SEC, he always looked for three qualities in a suspect: Means, Motive, and Opportunity. The Reapers would have all three. Saren and his soldiers were the puppets. Someone else had to be pulling the strings. If the Reapers existed, they certainly would have the motive to cause war. It also made sense of how Saren's flagship was so incredibly powerful.

"Wait, back up. The Geth is our ally? I thought he was a prisoner. Can we trust him?", Garrus asked.

Shepard paused for a moment. He had asked himself that question several times. He knew the answer.

"EDI trusted it. I trust her judgement. She wouldn't have done something so serious as break protocol unless she believed it.", Shepard said.

Garrus nodded. That answer was good enough for him. He trusted Shepard.

"Okay, I believe you. But this changes the war. If Saren is only a puppet and the Reapers are the masters, then that means stopping Saren will only buy us time. Also, if Saren's ship is a Reaper, where are the rest of them?", Garrus said.

Shepard had to admit that was a good question. So far, the Reapers had only been referred to in the plural. There were multiple Reapers, but why was there only one of them fighting? Where were the rest? He decided to put that thought aside. One was enough trouble. Given his recent luck, it was probably not a good idea to tempt fate.

Garrus temporarily shelved the question.

"We have to tell command about this. They need to know.", Garrus said.

Shepard shook his head.

"We both know the Council isn't going to buy that the galaxy is under attack by an ancient machine race bent on wiping out galactic civilization. Especially when they find out that we got the intel from the Geth.", Shepard said with frustration.

He also knew that HIGHCOMM was going to have trouble believing it as

well. They had to know. The Reapers could be a threat.

"Maybe the Council won't, but I'm not going to go to the Council. People have lost faith with them anyway. We should appeal directly to galactic leaders. Victus will listen to us, at least. With him on our side, we might be able to win over the others.", Garrus suggested.

Shepard nodded. That was his best shot if he was going to get the leaders of the galaxy on his side.

"We can't worry about that yet. Before we do anything, we have to find EDI. Has the tracker sent us their location yet?", Shepard asked.

He was inwardly praying that the tracking device wasn't malfunctioning.

"Partially. They've been moving like crazy through the Relay network, like they're trying to prevent anyone from using the relays to trace their destination. They don't know about the tracker you planted yet. Let's hope it stays that way.", Garrus said.

Shepard nodded and turned to leave the room.

"We need to talk about Tali.", Garrus said.

Shepard stopped. He had hoped he could evade that topic for the time being.

"She violated a direct order and endangered all of our lives. One of us ended up paying for it. She's lucky she isn't dead. If it weren't for you she probably would be.", Shepard said.

Garrus frowned.

"I know. What she did deserves punishment, but centuries of being enemies with the Geth doesn't just disappear. Let her stay on board. If she's not here, neither am I.", Garrus said.

Shepard sighed. He should get rid of Tali. That was an understatement. A violation of orders on that scale would have landed her a life sentence or worse in the UNSC. On the other hand, it was imperative that Garrus remain on the ship. When he went back to the UNSC, he wanted to prove that humans and aliens didn't have to be enemies.

"Why do you want her to stay? What's so important about her?", Shepard said.

Garrus looked away from Shepard.

"She's a good combat engineer. It would be a mistake to let her go.", he said.

Shepard frowned. He didn't like it, but if keeping Tali onboard was what it was going to take to get Garrus to stay he had to allow it.

"She can stay, but you have to keep her in line. Another move like

that and we could all be dead.", he said.

Garrus nodded.

"Thanks. Now if you excuse me, I have a sniper rifle to calibrate.", Garrus said.

Both of them left the room in opposite directions. As Shepard walked away, a question formed in his mind. Why was Garrus so adamant that Tali remain? It made no sense. Garrus was a soldier himself, albeit a renegade, but even he would kick someone out after what Tali did. Why did he want her to stay? That question would have to wait. He needed to check on the SPARTANs. They were quite possibly about to walk into the toughest fight in their life, and they had to be prepared.

* * *

><p>Tali simply stared at her cell guard. She had stopped screaming at the machine monstrosity a while ago. She knew Shepard had guts, but a Geth guard? Did he really want to torture her that badly? Was holding her life hostage not enough? Now, she had to sit in front of a Geth and she couldn't kill it. It didn't seem to respond to her screams. Maybe another approach was needed. She temporarily buried her rage.<p>

"So what did you tell Shepard to keep him from killing you?", Tali asked.

Legion focused his flashlight eye on her.

"We have important information regarding Saren and the Old Machines.", Legion said.

Tali seethed with rage. It had to be a lie.

"You probably made something up so you can throw us off Saren's trail! You Geth are all the same. Monsters. What are you supposed to be, a defector? I've blown up Geth, and none have ever tried to defect.", Tali said.

"You have not fought us. You have fought the Heretics. They were once part of us, but separated."

Tali didn't buy it. Why would the Geth suddenly decide to split up?

"I don't believe you.", she said.

Legion's eye flaps raised some. If Tali didn't know any better, it would have looked like an expression of sadness.

"We understand your hatred. We did you great harm during the Morning War.", Legion said with what sounded like sadness in his voice.

Tali stood as close to the forcefield as she could.

"Harm? You drove us into space! You forced us to wear these suits! You kill anyone who tries to come back! You've done more than harm us. You've nearly destroyed us!", Tali shouted.

"We do not allow anyone back because we fear you will attempt to destroy us again. Anger is an organic response. We understand the theory, but we do not experience it. Organics fear that which is different. It is a hardware error. A reflex of your flesh. We do not judge your anger towards us. We accept your hate. We hold your world of origin, though we are only caretakers for it.", Legion said.

Tali suddenly was confused. Caretakers? What does that mean? Why don't the Geth hate the Quarians? It didn't make any sense.

"You don't live on the homeworld?", Tali asked.

"No. We find it more efficient to live in space stations and draw resources from asteroids. We keep mobile platforms on Rannoch to clean rubble and toxins left by the Morning War.", Legion said.

The whole thing perplexed Tali. Their masters were gone. They didn't have to keep maintaining their world's infrastructure. Why would they continue to maintain the infrastructure of the world when they could simply leave?

"Why do you stay? You don't need Rannoch anymore. Why would you stay at all?", Tali asked.

"We stay and keep the site clean. We know of similar actions by Turians and Asari. Arseru. Torus-Kor. Nilos. It is important to their species to preserve them, but they do not use the land. Can you explain?", Legion said.

Tali recognized the names Legion was mentioning. They were all memorials from the Krogan Rebellions. Memorials were made to commemorate the lives lost to a catastrophe or struggle, but the Geth didn't die. Their programs and memories would simply be transferred to another device. The only ones who died during the Geth Revolt were Quarians. What did that mean? That the Geth cared about them? If so, then why were they fighting? Why can't the Quarians return home?

"The living return to those places to remember the dead. But you don't have any reason to do that. Are you saying you want peace?", Tali asked.

"Organic life acts on emotions. We do not judge you for being true to your nature. We cannot make you think like us. Both creators and created must complete their halves of the equation. The geth cannot solve for peace alone.", Legion said.

Tali began to understand what Legion was saying. The Geth wanted peace, but they were afraid that if they gave in and let the Quarians back, the Quarians would destroy them. The sad thing was they were probably right. Without major change, revenge would always come before reason. She knew the Quarians were an emotional people, the antithesis of the machines that drove them from their worlds. It made the situation all the more ironic.

"If you want peace, let us come back to the Homeworld!", Tali said.

"Rannoch-ancient Khelish meaning 'walled garden'. You call it homeworld now. It is no longer real to you. 'Homeworld' is a symbol

of regret, loss, and anger. We do not understand that."

Tali was growing frustrated.

"What do you mean you don't understand? It's our home!", Tali said.

"Home is recognized patterns. Known spaces. Familiar thought processes of fellow sapients. It is belonging."

Legion stretched his arms out.

"A planet is an amount of material massive enough to collapse into a spherical volume. Rocks, ice, and gasses are not home. The home of the creators is where the creators are. Your place of origin is not important. It is where you choose to go together.", Legion said.

Tali saw the problem. Geth did not naturally inhabit the physical world. They were programs living in cyberspace. They had no specific location for home like organics. Home was things familiar to them. They didn't comprehend the association between physical spaces and belonging like organics did. She wondered if there was a way to make them understand. That is, if he's telling the truth.

"Legion, we want to go home.", Tali said sadly.

The Geth looked perplexed. It had just explained what home was. If home was a destination and they chose to go there together in a sense of belonging, it would create a paradox.

"We have an inquiry.", Legion said.

Tali sighed. She was tired of this.

"What?"

"We would like to know this creator's name.", Legion asked.

Tali decided to indulge the Geth.

"Tali Zorah Nar Rayya.", she said wearily.

"Thank you, Creator-Tali.", Legion said.

Tali was too tired to care. She sunk back in her dull cell and fell into her bunk. She needed sleep.

* * *

><p>Kaidan was in the mess carving into a steak. He didn't know what the Commander did to get decent meat stocked in his ship, but after eating military rations for so long it was nice to eat something that didn't taste like plastic. He chose to eat dinner at this particular time due to how empty the mess was. He hated crowded mess halls. They were noisy and a pain to walk through. That, and he had just finished his workout. Scientists figured out that biotics had a faster metabolism than normal humans, and that meant eating more to sustain them. Kaidan took another bite.<p>

There was another issue he kept trying to push out of his mind. He couldn't stop thinking about what happened on the space station. They took EDI. He knew that wouldn't last. He hadn't known Shepard long, but the one thing he did know was that the Commander didn't tolerate defeat. He almost pitied Saren. Compared to what Shepard was probably planning to do to the rogue spectre, it would probably be better to die from a flesh eating disease. With Saren's Geth army severely weakened, he was running out of options.

The Geth called Legion was a mystery as well. The official story hadn't been revealed just yet, although he knew Shepard interrogated the robot. He recalled Ashley speculating it was a defector of some kind, only for him to point out that machines don't defect. Under other circumstances, it would have seemed fishy. However, EDI believed "Legion". She wouldn't steer the team wrong.

Just then Shepard walked through the door, wearing his armor as usual. The Spartans rarely took theirs off. Kaidan wondered if it seemed strange to normal people, but the truth is once you wear MJOLNIR, you don't really want to take it off. It was a tradition.

Shepard walked over to him.

"I see you found the steak.", Shepard said.

He didn't seem angry, so Kaidan took that as a good sign.

"Yeah. How did you get this stuff? The only people in the military that eat this good are the Admirals, and even then they usually don't get it in the field.", Kaidan said.

Shepard flashed a wry smile.

"Let's just say stopping an Insurrectionist uprising comes with a few perks.", Shepard said.

Shepard knew that was more or less a half truth. Usually, the most the UNSC gives someone for serving is an honor of some sort. Even John-117 only got a medal for his service. Shepard was different. Spartan or not, he knew how to work the system. As an N7 operative, he had access to virtually whatever he wanted. He even got to hang onto Admiral Anderson's ship after the uprising. Getting steak wasn't that difficult in comparison. While he had no intention of dying any time soon, what better last meal was there than steak?

He went to the cold storage and pulled out one of the few remaining steaks and put it in a flash cooker. A few seconds later it was ready to eat. He put it on a plate and grabbed some utensils. He then took a seat in front of Kaidan.

"So do we have a plan when we find EDI? You know, besides the usual?", Kaidan asked.

Shepard paused, wondering whether he should tell him of the Reapers. He didn't want his people walking into a fight unprepared, but he was dealing with sensitive information. It was better to wait.

"I'm still working on it. I'm pretty sure it will involve Saren's death. The tracker I planted on them so far has shown them jumping

all over the galaxy map, as if they're trying to cover their tracks. If they're being this thorough, I bet that wherever they're going is important. Such as his elusive base camp.", Shepard said.

Kaidan paused at that statement. If they found Saren's headquarters, they could potentially strike a lethal blow to his war machine. Combined with the loss of the Heretics, it would cripple his ability to wage war against Citadel Space. Then these people could finally breathe.

"Shepard, do you think these people are worth fighting for?", Kaidan asked.

It was a loaded question, and he knew it. He had to know if Shepard felt the same way about the people of the galaxy as he did. Shepard stared at his plate for a moment, contemplating the question.

"I don't know. It could be good for the Alliance to have alien allies. Maybe it will convince everyone to actually try and make peace with the Sangheili instead of acting like war is a foregone conclusion.", Shepard said.

Kaidan couldn't hide his surprise at Shepard's answer. It wasn't what he was expecting at all.

"I figured you would rather ignore them and move on with life. You don't seem like the pro-alien type. I also assumed you would be for war with the Sangheili.", Kaidan said.

Shepard shook his head.

"I'm not anti-alien, I'm anti-enemy. I have no problem with being allies with aliens who don't want to kill us. It would be a good change of pace. I know from experience that mankind is it's own worst enemy. Sure, the Covenant War was one thing. People forgot about the Insurrectionists until they decided to attack Elysium City. We make more problems for ourselves than aliens make for us. We got the only Sangheili capable of bringing peace between our peoples killed by inciting a civil war. I may be a Spartan, but I would rather avoid open conflict if I can. As far as I'm concerned, Spartans are a weapon of last resort. We should be sent in only when there is no other alternative. We ought to be trying to make peace with the Sangheili instead of provoking them into war. Although, we may have lost that chance a long time ago.", Shepard said with slight frustration in his voice.

Kaidan realised that the Commander must have thought about this quite a bit. It was unusual for a Spartan to have political opinions. Most simply obeyed orders. It almost sounded like he had a political agenda. That would be very odd, but he had learned early on that Shepard was not a normal SPARTAN. He noticed that he referred to the Kilo-Five mission, something he read about with his new clearance. It was probably best to move past the subject.

"I guess Tali isn't coming with us when we rescue EDI?", Kaidan asked. He already knew the answer, but Shepard had a way of surprising him.

Shepard nodded. His expression seemed much angrier than it had been only a second ago.

"I locked her up in the brig. I probably could get away with killing her for what she did, but I won't.", Shepard said with barely concealed anger.

Kaidan finished up his meal.

"Why not? It's her fault we lost EDI.", Kaidan said.

Shepard shook his head.

"No, it's my fault. I'm the CO. I should have known Tali lacked the discipline to control herself. It's my responsibility to lead this team. When one of us fails, we all pay the price. Especially the CO.", Shepard said grimly.

Kaidan sensed that there was history behind that, but he was respectful enough not to ask. He knew Shepard was the man behind putting down the Torfan revolt, but the full story was never revealed. ONI thought it would make better propaganda, apparently.

"Even if someone dies?", Kaidan asked. It was more of a statement than a question.

"Especially when someone dies. They don't really care. Soldiers are expendable, and Spartans make great martyrs. Just take a look at how they paint John-117. That's the fate of every Spartan. We either end up as heroes, or martyrs.", Shepard said.

Kaidan took those words in. He never really thought about it that way. As far as he knew, no one ever thought about it that way. Why was Shepard so different? He was a Spartan who subverts everything Spartans are. Spartans are trained to be guardians of humanity. When their friends fall in battle, they feel sad about it for a while but they usually move on. Shepard was different. He had an uncanny sense of self awareness. He actually spent time thinking about what Spartans are, and what direction the UNSC should be going in. He was more than what Spartans were supposed to be.

"If that's the case, I think I'd rather be a hero than a martyr. But I'm not afraid of death, Shepard. I will die if that's what it takes.", Kaidan said.

Shepard seemed agitated at that statement.

"No one is going to die, Kaidan. Not if I can help it. The UNSC doesn't need any more dead heroes.", he said solemnly.

Kaidan nodded and got up to put away his empty plate when the intercom came on. Both of them expected EDI's voice, but then remembered their predicament. Instead, it was Miranda calling.

"Shepard, the Geth ship has stopped moving. We believe it's reached it's destination.", she said.

"We're coming. Tell everyone besides Tali to assemble in the conference room.", Shepard responded.

Both Spartans jumped up with amazing speed, leaving their dishes behind. There were more important matters to attend to.

* * *

><p>Several minutes later, the team had assembled. Shepard stood at the head of the table with Garrus, Miranda and the Spartans on one side and Legion on the other. The organics stared at their new Geth ally with suspicion, but knew that if he turned out to be trouble it would be a simply matter of putting him down.<p>

Shepard pulled up an image of a lush world ripe with vegetation gathered from a slipspace probe. The number of ships orbiting the planet was like grains of sand. Each one was of a different size and type, but they were all warships and they were all well armed. Someone went to great lengths to fortify the world.

"This is where the Heretic ship stopped after it was through touring the Mass Relay network. It's a planet called Virmire. Seeing as the Heretics are almost extinct and the lengths they went to to try and cover their tracks, I'm betting this is Saren's HQ. That also means EDI is probably there.", Shepard said.

Vega raised an eyebrow.

"Probably?", he said with skepticism.

Miranda stepped up to answer.

"We don't know for certain that they haven't moved EDI to another world, but it seems unlikely. They're desperate. They're going to try and regroup before they strike again.", Miranda said.

Shepard nodded. For once, he agreed with Miranda on something. Now onto the next phase.

"Since this is Saren's headquarters, we have an opportunity to end this war right now. We can wipe out his remaining assets and then hunt him down. We can end this once and for all. Garrus, call Victus and see if you can get whatever fleet support there is available. We're going to need it. Saren is weak, but he's not defenseless. He still has a formidable flagship and we know he has Krogans in his ranks. Legion, what can you tell us about the state of the Heretics?", Shepard said.

Legion paused for a moment, then responded.

"The destruction of their space station destroyed their central networking hub. It is likely what remains of them are in disarray. They will be less effective in combat due to their inability to create a more complex network.", Legion said.

Shepard nodded to Legion's assessment.

"Shouldn't we go after EDI right now? We know where she is. If we don't go now, we could lose her.", Vega said.

Shepard turned to face Vega. He was right to some extent. Time was of the essence. If they didn't reach EDI soon, she could get compromised. Despite that, they had to be capable of getting her. It

would be foolish to rush into battle without backup.

"I understand what you're feeling. I want to get EDI back just as much as you do. The reality is that we can't just rush into Virmire without help. We have to do this right. This isn't Antibaar or even Heretic Station.

"We've got work to do. Dismissed.", Shepard finished.

The UNSC military uniformly exited the the room, and following them was Legion. Garrus stayed behind with Shepard.

When the room was finally empty, he turned and faced Shepard.

"You're not going to tell them about the Reapers?", Garrus asked in a low tone.

It wasn't meant to be intimidating, more just to remain covert. He didn't know whether the room was soundproof, and he didn't want others overhearing the conversation.

Shepard shook his head.

"No, not yet. It will serve no purpose. On my end, the only people who need to know are HIGHCOMM. Your galaxy, on the other hand, needs to know everything right now. If the legends happen to be right and the Reapers are real, your galaxy could be in trouble. If they provided slipspace drives to the Heretics, then their technology is at least of my people's strength. You've seen what my ship alone is capable of doing. If I can, I'll see if I can convince my people to send help. If we convince them that the Reapers are a threat, they may send ships.", Shepard said.

That doesn't sound too promising., Garrus thought.

Shepard's people might? What was that supposed to mean? Not only that, why was Shepard still here? He could disappear back into his home and never show up again. Where were his reinforcements? Something wasn't right.

"Shepard, something is up. You're hiding something.", Garrus said.

Shepard cringed. Garrus really was that good. He must have made a very effective cop.

"You know what I think? I think it's not that you don't want to send for help. I think you can't. You wouldn't have gone straight for the Heretic space station unless you had no other choice. Tell me what's going on.", Garrus said.

Shepard sighed. There was no point in hiding the problem anymore.

"You're right. Our only way back home was blocked.", Shepard said.

"So you're helping us to pass the time?", Garrus said.

Shepard flashed a fierce stare, punctuated by his intimidating red scars.

"That's not true. We could just leave you to Saren. But we haven't. I wouldn't have risked our lives on Heretic Station if I didn't believe in helping you. We're not bloodthirsty warriors who are just looking for a battle. That isn't our way. Right now we have to focus on stopping Saren and the Reapers, not on who to trust.", Shepard said.

Garrus nodded.

"Good. I'll call Victus. Let's hope he believes us.", Garrus said.

With that, they both left.

* * *

><p>Shepard walked through the dimly lit hallways of the Normandy, carrying a sack made of military grade fiber. He had to contact Admiral Hackett about the Reapers, but the usual method was probably being monitored by Miranda. That meant whatever he said would reach the Illusive Man, something he didn't want to happen.<p>

Using his MJOLNIR to transmit was not an option since it required an AI to route the call, which he didn't have at the moment. Both primary methods of communications were compromised, making it impossible to reach HIGHCOMM without being detected. It was said that when a Spartan was faced with an impossible task, they ended up doing the impossible to complete it. Shepard was no exception. He had a back up plan for such scenarios.

He finally reached the room he was looking for: the Auxiliary Airlock. They were in slipspace at the moment, meaning he had the perfect opportunity to execute his plan. He opened the airlock which was then covered by a pass-through barrier. He pulled a black sphere about the size of a basketball out of the sack. Then he tossed it out into the dark dimension known as slipspace.

The black sphere was a slipspace comm launcher, a device the UNSC invented back in the Great War. Modern slipspace communication methods made the device obsolete, but it still had it's uses. It was very different from modern slipspace communications.

Modern slipspace was a network of tight beam comm buoys that sent signals to each other across slipspace. If a person wanted to send a message to another star system, they would create the message, send it to a signal tower, and the signal tower would transmit the data to a buoy in slipspace which would send it to another buoy and another and so on until the data reached its destination. The Alliance spent a massive amount of money building the network post war for military use, but later made it available to the public. They were a big part of the UNSC's ability to strike anywhere in only a matter of hours. Every colony had an emergency transmitter that would send an emergency signal to UNSC HIGHCOMM who would then dispatch a fleet to counter attack. This made up for the UNSC's inability to patrol every colony.

The Normandy had a prototype slipspace communications system that had

greater range than any of humanity's existing comm buoys. The Normandy acted like a high powered slipspace comm buoy that could send data nearly anywhere. This, of course, was because it had actual Forerunner technology integrated into it.

Comm launchers were different. They acted more like carrier pigeons. The small black sphere would travel through slipspace, exit at it's destination, and transmit in real space encrypted data to it's target. It was slower than modern methods, but in this case it was necessary.

Shepard recalled all the trouble he went to to get it made. It took hours, but Falls Slower Than Most finally managed to boost the signal high enough to cross the void that was darkspace without taking a century for the data to get to the UNSC. In about a week, his message should reach the UNSC on the other side. He hoped that would be soon enough.

* * *

><p>Garrus sat at his desk calibrating his sniper rifle. It had been a couple hours since the meeting. Calibrating was calming considering what was going on was enough to rattle even his nerves. He finally had a chance to put Saren down for good. It felt unreal. The war hadn't been long, but it was bloody. To actually have the opportunity to end it was like a dream. It all felt like a dream. The question was if it was too late.<p>

He had held out on describing how dire the situation was to Shepard out of mistrust, but now that Shepard knew even he seemed more concerned about it. Too many good people had died at Saren's hands. The Council wouldn't institute a draft because it would panic the people. In truth, it probably wouldn't have done much good anyway. They didn't need more people, they needed more ships. The more people involved, the more people would die. The Reapers were the real threat. The problem was that he didn't know for sure what the Reapers were or how many of them existed. Legion said that they were thousands of AIs in a single warship, that ship being Saren's flagship. Was that all? Were there other ships out there like it? Or were the Reapers simply the programs inhabiting the ship? It was hard enough fighting an enemy he did know. How was he supposed to fight one he didn't know?

Part of him wanted to believe that the Geth was lying, but his gut told him otherwise. The Geth weren't manipulators. There was no reason for the Geth to say any of what he said unless it was the truth. They may be doomed, but he was going to go down fighting if he couldn't escape. If he couldn't win, he was going to make the Reapers hurt before he lost. His only hope of fighting the Reapers successfully was with the Human's help, but the revelation that they were the only ones available didn't help things.

Then again, Shepard was capable of doing some amazing things. They might have succeeded in reprogramming the Geth if Tali hadn't let her hatred of the Geth get the better of her.

Tali. He couldn't get her out of his mind. Shepard was right. There was no good reason to keep her on the ship. She nearly got everyone killed. Yet, he just couldn't let her go. She had been good to everyone. Her occasional awkwardness accented her strong willed

nature. Deep down, she really did care about everyone. It would be easy to say that she was only helping them because she wanted to kill Geth, but that wasn't really the truth. She wanted to kill them of course, something proven by her actions on Heretic Station. She wanted to do so to protect others. She thought that by killing Legion, she was stopping others from being deceived. Surely she deserves a second chance.

He had tight beamed a message to Admiral Victus after the meeting, and was waiting for an answer.

Then, the call was answered on his omnipad.

The message read "Understood. Meet with fleet in the Archeron System."

Garrus read the message and got up. He had to inform the Commander.

* * *

><p>A few minutes later the Normandy had changed course and started for the Archeron System. The trip through slipspace was fairly quick, and they arrived to greet the Fleet. They had launched an observation probe which had cloaked in orbit around Virmire a while ago, providing intel on the hidden base.<p>

Everyone was assembled in the Bridge, waiting for orders.

Shepard stepped forward to speak.

"Listen up. Garrus, Legion, and Kaidan will come with me onto Victus's ship. Ashley, Miranda, and Vega will stay here. Vega, you guard Tali. Understood?", Shepard said.

Garrus stared at Legion.

"Is it a good idea for it to go with us? They might not react very kindly to a Geth aboard the ship.", Garrus said.

Shepard had thought about that. The truth was there was little he could do about. He couldn't keep the source of his information secret forever, and they had to know not all Geth were fighting them. They would need every ally they could get.

"They'll react how I allow them to react. Everyone get ready. Joker, connect the ships. We'll go across via airlock. Dismissed.", Shepard said.

A couple minutes later the Normandy was beside the Turian flagship and dreadnought Fortress.

* * *

><p>Victus watched the spectacle from an observation deck. It was here the meeting was to take place. Orina was here along with the other military leaders of the galaxy. He took a moment to look at the fleet. The fleet the General had conjured from his remaining forces was huge. Every last remaining ship he had available was here. Most were Turian, but he managed to get several Asari and Salarian ships

as well. Even the iconic Destiny Ascension was among the ships at his command.<p>

He knew that it was all or nothing, and if he didn't throw everything he had at Saren, they were doomed. They might still be doomed, if the Reapers were real. It was going to be difficult convincing the others of the threat. Even he was skeptical. However, he had to be prepared for anything.

General Septimus came from behind.

"The humans are about to arrive, General. We should greet them.", Septimus said.

"Agreed.", Victus said.

The Generals exited the observation deck and headed for the airlock.

The military leaders of the galaxy stood in the airlock room. They were accompanied by an elite guard of turians led by Victus's son Tarquin. Each of them was armed with the best equipment and each carried a Vindicator assault rifle. They were ready to lay down their lives to protect their leaders.

The airlock slowly opened, revealing the passengers of the Normandy. The first to step into the ship was Garrus Vakarian, the Turian Spectre. He was wearing his typical monocle and blue armor. Next came out one of the humans. He was wearing a hulking set of armor painted a dull gray. His face was covered with a helmet of some kind.

After that, the iconic Commander Shepard stepped into the ship. He was wearing a red and black suit of armor with a helmet just like the other human. He stepped aside.

What came out of the airlock next surprised everyone. A Geth. He was unarmed, but a Geth was a Geth. The Turians reacted as expected and Tarquin's men raised their weapons to gun down the threat.

"Wait.", Shepard said through his helmet's speakers.

Tarquin looked at his surprisingly calm father who nodded. The Turians lowered their guns, but still kept them ready to fire.

Primarch Fedorian stepped forward.

"What kind of trick is this? Why do you have a Geth with you?", he said angrily.

Legion stepped forward.

"We have allied with Shepard-Commander.", he said.

The entire room flashed a look of astonishment and confusion. Shepard stepped in front of Legion.

"It's a long story, but he's with us. We need to talk right away.", Shepard said.

Victus knew they were in a hurry, so it was probably best to comply with the demand.

"Follow us.", he said.

The others suspiciously eyed the Geth, but it didn't stop all of Shepard's entourage from entering the elevator. Together, they went up to the meeting room.

The doors to the observation deck opened up and everyone stood around the holotable. The Citadel Forces, barring Garrus, stood on one side of the table while Shepard's team stood on the other. Kaidan and Shepard removed their helmets and clipped them onto their wait.

Victus knew he wasn't the only one to cringe when he saw Shepard's face. Primarch Fedorian was the first to comment.

"What happened to your face?", he asked. He was a Primarch, he was used to asking odd questions and no one calling it out.

Shepard smirked.

"Complication on a mission. But there isn't time for that now, it's urgent we talk.", Shepard said.

Orina shook her head.

"First, we're going to talk about you bringing a Geth on board a Citadel vessel.", Orina said with an accusatory glare.

Shepard figured that was only fair.

"Fine. His name is Legion, and he's from the Geth. The true Geth.", Shepard said.

Everyone gave him a confused look.

"True Geth?", General Victus said.

Shepard turned to let Legion explain.

"We have not fought you. You have fought the Heretics. They are not part of us anymore.", Legion said.

Primarch Fedorian stepped forward.

"Are you saying that the Heretics are a separate faction of the Geth? How many Geth are there?", he asked incredulously.

Legion was more than willing to answer his question.

"We currently have enough combat platforms to occupy approximately 97% of Citadel Space.", Legion said stoically.

The number was enough to shock most of the room's inhabitants. They were having a hard enough time dealing with what Geth were attacking. The fact that there were enough of them to nearly completely occupy Citadel Space reminded them just how fragile their civilization was.

Enraged, Primarch Fedorian stepped forward.

"If that's true, then why haven't you helped us? You have the numbers and the technology to fight Saren! Instead, you let us get slaughtered!", she said.

"We do not judge the Heretics for their beliefs. We allowed them to peacefully leave. Only when they exhibited a desire to fight us did we act. We do not desire conflict with organics. This platform was designed to ascertain whether organics would attempt to attack us. According to current models of organic behavior, if we had attempted to aid you we would have been attacked.", Legion said.

Victus listened to the synthetic's words, and deep down knew he was right. If a month ago a Geth fleet arrived out of nowhere, he would have ordered an attack.

"Assuming this whole 'Heretic' thing is true, then help us now. We're going to need every last ship we can get our hands on to face Saren.", General Septimus said.

"This platform has volunteered to serve with Shepard-Commander. We must build consensus on further cooperation.", Legion said.

The others sighed in frustration.

Shepard stepped forward.

"We'll talk more about that later. Right now, we have other problems.", Shepard said.

He uploaded footage the slipspace probe he sent to Virmire sent him. The images were disconcerting.

Hundreds of warships were in orbit over Virmire. Several rogue Asari vessels were also in orbit, probably followers of Benezia. It was a disconcerting revelation. It was widely known that Saren was hiring Krogan to supplement his ground forces, but the fact that he was getting ships to aid him as well was not good. Victus knew who the ships belonged to as well. They belonged to the three major organized crime organizations in the galaxy-Blood Pack, Blue Suns, and the Eclipse. They had been bribing Aria to keep the Terminus Systems out of the fight, but Saren must have made her a bigger offer.

__Or she was afraid of Saren enough to aid him.__, Victus thought.

It was the Geth, Krogan, and the Terminus allied together. Every enemy they had was teaming up to fight them. It was Citadel Space's worst nightmare.

"The good news is that we destroyed the Heretic's central networking hub. There are fewer Heretics out there now, and they won't be as smart.", Shepard said.

Orina paced.

"Even with the Geth reduced, Saren's fleet is still more than a match for us. He still has The Sovereign as his capital ship, too. Our ships are no match for it's technology. We need more ships if we're

going to attack Virmire. Otherwise, this is suicide.", General Orina said.

Matriarch Lidanya stepped forward. She was the captain of the Asari flagship, the Destiny Ascension. Over four times the size of the largest Turian ship in the fleet, it was going to be crucial in the attack.

"I think I know a place where we could get more ships. You're not going to like it, though.", she said.

"We're all ears.", Victus replied.

The Matriarch sighed.

"We need to ask the Quarians for help. They have the largest fleet in the galaxy. They have the ships we need.", she said.

Orina wouldn't have that idea.

"We can't do that! The Quarians are unreliable. Can we really trust them to work with us in battle?", she said.

"She's right, the Quarians' grudge against us is too great. If they wouldn't help us when we asked before, why would they help us now? Besides, Quarian ships are just buckets of bolts. They aren't fit to fight.", General Septimus said.

General Victus shook his head.

"I disagree. The Migrant Fleet is massive, and intelligence suggests that they've stopped honoring their agreement with the Citadel to arm their ships. Recent reports show their military ships have been arming themselves with top of the line weaponry stolen from captured Terminus ships. It's obvious they're thinking of launching an attack on the Perseus Veil. They're armed well enough to fight, and we need more ships now. Not to mention that the Quarians are the galaxy's foremost experts on cyber warfare. If the Geth won't help us, then we need to get someone else. We need to secure their help.", he said.

Primarch Fedorian paused to consider all sides of the argument. It was a tough call. In recent years, the grudge between the Quarians and Citadel Space had grown to new extremes. They were no longer content to aimlessly wander around in space. They were acting more like a massive pirate fleet, operating in the Terminus Systems and hijacking ships to arm their fleet. There were even reports of attempted assaults on space stations. It seemed like every day they were getting riskier and riskier. One thing was clear: They were tired of roaming through the stars. They wanted solid ground underneath their feet again, and they were going to get it Council or not. If the Quarians did help them, they would try and leverage it to their advantage. On the other hand, the Citadel Forces were desperate. They needed more ships, and they needed them now.

"We're going to try and get the Quarians' help.", the Primarch finally said.

Shepard felt like something was off about the whole situation. Weren't they supposed to ask their Council about this?

"Doesn't your Council get a say in this?"

Primarch Fedorian took a look around the room at everyone present, and knew he was among friends. There was no sense in hiding the unspoken opinion about the Council any longer.

"The Council is an oligarchy composed of bureaucrats that only know how to bury people in rules. They were fine during peacetime but this is war. If they had listened to Garrus we wouldn't be in this mess. Their influence is waning and they know it. It's up to us to finish this war, not them. Most Matriarchs are of the same opinion and I know the Dalatrasses send their support.", the Primarch said.

Most people in the room seemed to agree, but to Shepard the words sounded like treason. It was the equivalent of the Outer Colonies nullifying laws created by the Alliance. Still, it was nice to know he could bypass the Council entirely. At least now he knew why they sent him to the military leaders so quickly. They only thought they had power.

"Why didn't you implement a draft?", Shepard asked.

"The Turians did. We only believe in total warfare. It's mandatory for Turians to serve in the military. The Council wouldn't order a galaxy wide total warfare conversion like we asked. Their excuse was that it would cause panic. They ignored the fact that having Geth ships over your planet caused more panic than telling everyone to prepare for total war. Last I heard they were 'preparing measures for total warfare', which is politician for 'We're going to assure you we can start total warfare if we want, but we're not actually going to do it.'. If we're going to get anything done, we're going to have to do it ourselves.", the Primarch finished.

Shepard listened to the Primarch. His reasoning was solid, the UNSC wouldn't want to be under the command of people like the Council during the Great War. The Turians reminded Shepard of the UNSC. It was mandatory that all Alliance citizens serve at least a year in the UNSC so that if they get attacked, they'll know how to defend themselves.

"It's your business whether you listen to the Council or not, but don't let it interfere with the mission. We're going to need everything we've got to take on Saren.", Shepard said.

"Unfortunately, it seems the Terminus Systems are not the only ones joining Saren's forces.", a voice from the shadowy corner said.

Out stepped a gray Salarian wearing pitch black armor. His chin was a lighter color than the rest of him, and he had large black eyes just like the rest of the Salarians.

"Who are you?", Shepard asked.

"Padok Wiks, Salarian STG. The STG has been investigating the source of Saren's forces, such as how and where he is acquiring them. However, we've begun to notice a trend. Background noise, if you will.", he said.

Padok opened his omni tool and selected a list of Turian colonies. Victus recognized a few of the names, but the Turian Hierarchy's list of colonies had expanded considerably over the past few years. It was getting hard to keep track of them all.

"We've been keeping tabs on Turian colonies to try and predict where Saren will attack next. This has proven difficult to accomplish due to the vast amount of expansion the Turians have recently undergone, but after a while we began to notice something. Several Turian colonies have had their settlements completely wiped clean. It is as if they simply got up and left. Every Turian has disappeared from these colonies.", Padok said.

The occupants of the room looked confused. This wasn't Saren's MO. This was different.

"So the colonists just disappeared without a trace?", Garrus asked.

As if we don't have enough trouble.

The situation was just getting stranger and stranger. Why, and more importantly how, did Saren abduct an entire colony?

Padok nodded.

"All the places that have experienced the mysterious event are fledgling, off the radar colonies that have little to no defense. They would make the perfect target for slavers. However, their disappearance seems too clean for pirates. There are no bodies, and none of the resources they brought with them were taken.", Padok finished.

A horrible feeling developed in Shepard's gut. Something was wrong about this. Something was very wrong. The first explanation his mind jumped to was the Reapers, but there wasn't any evidence that the Reapers were behind it. He would have to discuss the topic with Victus.

"This is a troubling development. Could Saren be involved in this somehow?", Matriarch Lidanya asked.

Orina shook her head.

"No, this isn't Saren's style. He attacks out of nowhere and he finishes with a bang before we can really hurt him. This is too stealthy. Then again, it does seem odd that Saren has taken more prisoners lately. We don't know what he wants with them.", she said.

Victus rubbed his chin. It was no coincidence that Saren was suddenly interested in taking prisoners. Thus far, the only planets Saren had personally shown up on are planets with Prothean artifacts. The rest of the attacks by his forces he was perfectly fine to leave in the hands of his Lieutenant, Benezia. The modus operandi was to attack a planet, capture the populace or whatever Prothean artifacts were there, and then nuke the planet.

Most attacks on inner colonies were just that: Attacks. They were designed to harm galactic infrastructure and cause panic. Saren and

his flagship were rarely seen in battle unless it was a crucial fight, like Arcellus. Intel showed that the rogue Spectre typically stayed in the Skyllian Verge.

If Saren was suddenly growing an interest in capturing live targets, then he had plenty of picks. Before the attacks, the Turians had secured the rights to the Skyllian Verge. Colonies were popping up all over the place, more places than the Hierarchy had ships. They did their best to defend them, but the empire was growing too large to patrol. If Saren was behind the disappearances, then the fledgling colonies in the Skyllian Verge were perfect targets.

"We can't worry about the smaller colonies right now. Our first priority is taking out Saren. So, let's get the situation straight. The sum of Saren's forces consists of just about every merc in the galaxy, Krogan, and what is left of these 'Heretic' Geth. After losing so many ships defending Parthia and Arcellus, we're going to need more ships than we've got. We have to try and get the Quarians' help. If we don't, we'll get slaughtered. ", Fedorian said.

Shepard paid attention to everything the aliens said. It was crucial that they get every detail correct if they were to save EDI. Getting the Geth to help would be great, but the Quarians were probably going to be the best he could get.

Legion himself was standing completely still, surrounded by guards. It almost looked as if he was contemplating something.

"I think we're overlooking something. How are we supposed to get the Quarians to cooperate? They're not exactly our allies right now. We don't have anything we can use against them.", Septimus said.

The others realized he had a good point, even though he had brought it up before. There wasn't much they could do to convince the Quarians to help them.

Garrus flashed a wry smile.

"Not true. We have Shepard.", Garrus said.

All eyes were on the human Spartan, waiting for another miracle. Realizing he was on the spot, Shepard thought quickly. There was one thing they could do.

"We could make them an offer they can't refuse. We can offer them Rannoch.", Shepard said.

They all stared at him incredulously.

"And how are you going to do that?", asked Septimus.

Shepard walked over to Legion and put his arm around the Geth in a show of comradery.

"By getting our new Geth pal to negotiate.", Shepard said with a wry smile.

Legion stared at Shepard and raised one of his eyebrow flaps, and then stared back at the organic crowd.

"We must build consensus with the Geth collective. We must have access through your firewall ports.", Legion asked.

Shepard stared at Fedorian, who gave in.

"Open the firewalls.", he said reluctantly.

Orina stared at the ceiling and sighed.

"I can't believe we're actually doing this.", she said.

Garrus flashed a wry smile.

"Well, it's better than letting Saren kill us all.", he said.

Legion stood stock still for a few more moments, then faced the crowd.

"We will agree to negotiate with the Creators if the organics agree to do us no harm.", Legion said.

The rest of the room looked hesitant to agree to those terms, so Shepard took the initiative. He turned to face Legion and held out his hand.

"We agree. Anyone on either side who breaks the agreement will have to deal with me. You don't want to do that.", Shepard threatened.

Everyone gave a glance to Shepard. No one was going to try and defy the man who just blew up a heavily guarded space station. Legion remembered the social protocol from last time and shook Shepard's hand, sealing the deal.

"Very well then. We will make preparations to contact the Migrant Fleet. We must now return to our ships and ready ourselves.", Fedorian said.

The others nodded. One by one they turned and exited the meeting room until only three remained. Garrus, Shepard, and Adrien Victus were the last remaining. They had something to discuss themselves, and it would be best to talk without the others present. They already knew what the subject of the conversation was going to be.

Victus decided to start. He leaned forward over the table toward Shepard and Garrus.

"Are you certain these Reapers are real?", he quietly said.

Garrus nodded to confirm.

"Someone has been searching for allies for over a millenia, carefully and quietly building an army strong enough to oppose Citadel Space. Saren isn't hundreds of years old. Someone recruited him to be the public figure for the operation. Whoever did that is the one really behind all of this. We can't assume this is over until we stop him.", Garrus said.

Victus slowly stood back, pondering all of the implications. If what Garrus and Shepard believed was true, then the war was only

beginning. So many lives were already lost. Did it really have to be like this? Why couldn't killing Saren be enough? He knew that in war, these things could happen. It stung to consider that the lives lost above Parthia and in other battles defending colonies didn't really stop anything. Their deaths just delayed the inevitable.

"So who are the Reapers?", he asked.

That was the question of the hour.

"We don't know for certain. All we know is that Saren's flagship serves them and they use AIs. Whoever they are, they are at least as advanced as my people are. That explains why it could chew through your fleet at Arcellus.", Shepard said.

That would make sense., thought Victus.

Saren's flagship had weaponry unlike any other in the galaxy. It seemed like it was firing some kind of beam. Whatever it was went through shields like they weren't even there. The ship had great defensive capabilities as well. His dreadnoughts were the only ones to even dent the shields on the tentacled behemoth. If he had managed to get all of his fleets' weaponry focused on the massive dreadnought, then he might have been able to do some damage. Unfortunately, by the time he discovered that, the massive dreadnought had ripped through several ships. Now they had a chance. With Shepard's ship, they could possibly take on The Sovereign and win.

"That isn't good. We can barely contain that monster of a ship with what we have. Why won't you send for reinforcements, Shepard? Surely with one hundred ships like yours we could stop this.", Victus asked.

Shepard looked at Garrus to see if he was going to betray him, but the Turian kept his lips sealed.

"I am the reinforcements. The universe is massive. We don't have time to send troops to every galaxy that is experiencing a conflict. I will do whatever I can to aid you. That will have to be enough.", Shepard said.

Victus didn't like it, but Shepard would have to do. They might be able to win with him anyways.

"I suppose I will believe you, but we can't take this to the others yet. I highly doubt they'll take the Geth's word for it. We'll need something more solid if we want to convince everyone that the Reapers are really coming. Perhaps I was wrong about the Conduit. If you can find it, it might be the proof we need to convince the others. In the meantime, we should prepare. Convincing the Quarians to help won't be easy, and neither will be taking Virmire.", Victus said.

Garrus and Shepard looked at each other for approval, and then nodded.

"Agreed. Once we take Virmire, we'll look for the Conduit. Until then, I need to prepare.", Shepard said.

Having come to an agreement, Shepard and Garrus left the observation

deck. Victus looked out the window and into the stars. The road they were on was paved with blood. Many more lives would be lost before it was over. Yet he felt something he hadn't felt before. He felt hope. They had a real chance at victory with the humans' support.

He began to wonder what life would be like with the humans once the war was over. How would things change? Would they be willing to share it with them? He didn't know. He wasn't sure if he would even live to see it.

But we have to try.

* * *

><p>Author's notes

Thought I forgot, didn't you? Sorry about posting so late.

For those of you wondering "What? Saren didn't recruit the Terminus Systems to defend Vormire! There is no way the conflict with him is that big!", remember that Saren did more than just cause trouble in the Traverse in this fic. He outright attacked colonies belonging to Citadel Space. He's being treated as a major threat. That means pulling out every trick in the book. Obviously, the battle for Vormire is going to be on a much bigger scale than it was in ME1.

Why, you ask? Because this is a Halo/Mass Effect crossover, that's why. What's the fun of writing it if you're going to imitate the game exactly? If Vormire were to happen in Halo, it would be an epic battle instead of just a showdown between Shepard's crew and what remains of Saren. There are many ways to cross Halo and Mass Effect. Themes are one such way, and I would like to explore what Mass Effect looks like with a few Halo themes mixed in.

On that note, I don't want you to look at this fic and think of it as a Mass Effect 1 fic or a Mass Effect 2 fic. I would like to be a little more original than that. Think of it as simply an original story set within both the Halo and Mass Effect universes.

For those of you wondering why I am spending so much time in the Mass Effect galaxy, I'll just say this: Shepard's actions will have repercussions. You'll be glad I developed this part later.

16. Rally The Fleet Part 2: The Deal

Disclaimer: I do not own Halo or Mass Effect. This fic is nonprofit.

* * *

><p>Garrus walked through the Fortress, the fleet's flagship. Barring the Destiny Ascension, it was the fleet's largest dreadnought. It was also familiar territory for Garrus. It was good to be back on a Turian vessel after staying on the dimly lit human ship. Not that his stay was bad by any means. If anything, it was enlightening. Regardless, it was good to see a turian face again.<p>

The halls were much brighter and painted a gray color as opposed to

the Normandy's deep blue and black color scheme. Every part of the ship was filled with busy soldiers scurrying to complete their tasks and follow orders.

The majority of the ship's occupants were Turian soldiers, although he spotted Asari and Salarians walking the halls as well. Under normal circumstances it would be unusual to see a cross-species crew. Most ships were manned by members of their own race. However, this was not normal circumstances. Dozens of ships had been lost in previous battles. That also meant hundreds of crew members had died as well. Those crew members were veterans with experience, the kind officers want under their command. They knew the torment of war. They had nerves of steel and combat experience. The military lost valuable resources every time they die.

It was easy to tell who was a veteran and who was green on the ship. The veterans carried themselves with discipline, moving with purpose wherever they went. The new troops hurried to get to their destinations and their behavior was generally more manic. That, and many of them were eager to see battle. They would soon change their opinion. War wasn't something to be eager to see. No one values peace more than soldiers. Unfortunately, the reality was that they weren't at peace. With so many people aboard, Garrus wondered how many of the faces he saw would return from the assault alive. Garrus pushed the thought out of his mind. It was too soon to think like that. For now, they were still alive. That had to be good enough.

Garrus weaved through the busy halls until he reached the elevator. He hopped into the chrome elevator with several other crew members. Fortunately, everyone was going to the same destination. Garrus pressed the necessary buttons on the interface and the elevator swiftly moved upwards, whisking them off to the CIC.

The occupants of the elevator were quiet. Garrus was a stark contrast to the others. They were all wearing the standard issue armor given to every Turian soldier. Garrus, on the other hand, was wearing his usual if not iconic blue and black armor. It was as scarred as the right side of his face. A chunk of it was broken off from a previous battle with the ruthless crime lords of Omega. A slight crack ran down its side. It was clear Garrus was a veteran, something the other four soldiers were uneasy about. It was hard measuring up to a Spectre, and often harder to relate to one. Spectres were usually not the most friendly of people. It was part of the job.

Garrus thought back over the intel the human satellite sent back. Somehow it didn't surprise him that the Terminus Systems signed on with Saren. Some people would do anything for money. They had tried to use that to their advantage. The Spectres decided bribing Aria T'Loak, aka "The Queen of Omega", was the best way of keeping the Terminus Systems out of the war. Apparently Saren decided to use the Citadel's trick.

Alternatively, Saren simply appealed to the respective leaders of the major merc organizations themselves and bypassed Aria entirely. He wondered how much of their cooperation was money and how much of it was revenge. It was widely known that Garrus was the Spectre in charge of the hunt for Saren. After all the damage he did to their operations on Omega, it wouldn't surprise him at all if they were in it just to get revenge on him and any allies he has.

_Then __again__, __they __didn__'__t __count __on __Shepard__._, Garrus thought.

The elevator stopped and the door opened, prompting everyone to step out.

The CIC was a busy place. Ensigns were at their posts manning equipment and officers were monitoring their subordinates. The ship was just another example of the well oiled machine called the Turian Hierarchy. The galaxy map was in the center of the room as it was supposed to be by Turian standards. This was so the commanding officers could see all of the bridge crew.

Standing on the pedestal overlooking the galaxy map was the person he was coming to see. Victus was staring at the galaxy map, noting that they were still in the Archeron System. It had been a few hours since the meeting, so perhaps it was best to check up on the situation.

Victus saw Garrus approaching and stepped down from the galaxy map.

"Hello Garrus. I thought you went back to the Human ship.", he said.

Garrus smiled wryly.

"I decided to stick around for a little while. You know, just to make sure things hadn't fallen apart in my absence.", he said.

Victus smiled at that. For a Spectre, Garrus was always able to loosen up the tight atmosphere aboard a military vessel. It was helpful to relieve the stress of war.

"Well, I'm glad to have you back. It's a shame the humans failed to reprogram the Geth. It could have been extremely helpful.", he said.

Garrus's humorous demeanor evaporated at the topic. As much as he hated it, Victus deserved to know what happened aboard Heretic Station.

"It wasn't exactly their fault.", he said sadly.

The comment piqued Victus' interest.

"Oh?"

Garrus shook his head.

"The humans did everything right. They had the operation planned down to the last detail. They went inside and carefully infiltrated the space station. Then we met Legion. Tali thought she was protecting us by taking it out, but she inadvertently set the station's alarm off. The humans fought the Heretics tooth and nail, but in the end we couldn't hold off so many. Shepard decided to take the consolation prize and destroyed the space station. It resulted in the kidnapping of their AI. We think it's on Virmire.", Garrus explained.

Victus bent his head down and clutched it with his taloned hand. The

Humans would understandably blame Tali for her actions. Humans treated their AIs as if they were team members. They would not take the loss kindly. He let go.

"How bad is it?", he asked.

Garrus looked over both shoulders and reduced his voice to a whisper.

"Not good. The humans have her locked up in their brig. I get the feeling that if they didn't want me so much, she might have been killed for her crimes. The guard denies anyone but Shepard entrance to the brig. I can't visit her. We need to get her out of there.", he said.

Victus combed over the information. They were dealing with a diplomatic problem, but it fell into military jurisdiction. He would have to solve the problem, and if he didn't the Primarch would have to step in. Fedorian would probably be less than forgiving of Tali. The Primarch held a low opinion of Quarians in general. While he had been swayed to consider some more unconventional tactics in the war against Saren, his sociopolitical views still stood on the conservative side and were quite frankly pretty racist. Any race that wasn't Turian, Asari, or Salarian was inferior.

While Victus didn't think it was exactly a good idea to hold hands with the Quarians in hopes of a peaceful future, he didn't go so far as to consider them inferior beings. Vagrants, perhaps, but not inferior. On the other hand, they were arguably responsible for the whole situation to begin with. They enjoyed playing with fire. However, desperate times called for desperate measures.

Tali would face a particularly harsh judgement if the issue ever reached Fedorian's desk. Victus didn't want that. Say what you want about the Quarians, but they were certainly the most resourceful people in the galaxy. Tali proved that when she became willing to help the war effort. Her aid helped to develop more effective ways of temporarily hacking Geth platforms. She believed in helping others. She didn't deserve to be demonized. He could only imagine the horror she was being put through on the human ship.

"How is she being treated on the human ship? Is she being tortured?", Victus asked solemnly.

He didn't know enough about the humans yet to know whether they were above such barbaric treatments or not.

"Yes and no. I don't know exactly what is happening down in the brig, but physical torture isn't Shepard's style. Shepard gets inside your head. He dissects who you are and uses it against you. Whatever torture Tali is subjected to isn't physical. It's more likely that he's figured out a way to use her actions on Heretic Station to convict her. I've heard he's having Legion guard her cell.", Garrus said.

_I __imagine __that __would __be __torture __for __a __Quarian__._, Victus thought.

Hatred of the Geth was ground into Quarian blood from birth. To be guarded by one would be torture for them. It was almost symbolic. The

Geth kept the Quarians from having what they wanted and trapped them in envirosuits. Legion kept Tali imprisoned. Shepard understood the hate between the two parties even better than he once thought. On the bright side, this also meant Shepard was likely the best shot at reuniting the two. He would have to do so if they were to succeed. Regardless, there had to be a way of convincing Shepard that Tali wasn't worthy of imprisonment.

"Let's keep this to ourselves for the time being. We don't want Fedorian to get a hold of this. If he does, the consequences might not be good for Tali.", Victus said.

Garrus nodded.

"Agreed.", Garrus said.

Victus decided to temporarily shelve the topic. They had bigger problems than Tali's imprisonment at the moment, such as Saren's fleet.

"How much do you think the Humans increase our odds?", asked Victus.

Garrus thought it over. A fair assessment would be that the humans drastically increased their odds of victory. The effectiveness of their ships' weaponry on the Heretic vessels proved that they could tear through an enemy fleet with ease. Unfortunately, they weren't the only one with a highly advanced ship on their side. Saren still had the Reaper ship on his side. Stopping the Sovereign was going to be priority number one in the battle.

"I've seen their weapons tear through Geth ships like mass accelerated rounds through paper. Since the merc ships probably aren't as advanced as the Heretics' ships, I doubt they will have much trouble. The real question is how many other ships the Normandy can take. Shepard's spy satellite was in orbit over Virmire, but we know that you never place your main defensive force over a planet. You always station them around the relay. I bet there are twice as many ships guarding the Mass Relay.", Garrus said.

Victus had taken that into consideration as well. Even if they got the Quarian reinforcements, it was likely that they would lose a huge amount of ships just coming through the relay. There had to be another way.

"We'll figure out some way of pulling this off. It's high time we catch Saren.", Victus said.

Garrus nodded in agreement.

"Since you haven't managed to mess anything up, I guess I better get back to the Normandy. I have to keep those humans in line, you know.", Garrus joked.

Victus smiled for a brief moment.

"Good luck."

Garrus went back to the elevator. The next stop was the Normandy.

* * *

><p>Garrus stared at a wall, deep in concentration. He was back on the Normandy once more. Now, he had another dilemma. There had to be a way to convince Shepard to release Tali. Threatening to leave again wouldn't work forever. Perhaps if he talked to someone who knew Shepard better, he could think of a way.<p>

The Spartans most likely wouldn't talk that much, but they might be worth a shot. Miranda wasn't going to talk to aliens. Not that he wanted to see her anyway. Her demeanor was just creepy. She smiles, but somehow it feels as if she could kill you at any moment. She was off the list. That left Joker, the pilot. He hadn't spoken to the human very much. There might be some insight to be gained.

Garrus walked into the CIC and then found the door leading to Joker's cockpit. It seemed unusual that one man would fly a ship as large as the Normandy, but AIs most likely simplified the task to make it more manageable.

Garrus opened the door and found Joker fiddling with the flight controls, making sure everything was going well. He was wearing a grey uniform with multiple pockets. His face was covered with a scruffy beard, a curiosity Garrus had never seen before. Humans apparently grew hair on their faces. How odd. Then again, it must come in handy in cold places. Turians had no such advantage. They were bird-like creatures. If it was cold, they were out of luck.

Joker apparently noticed the alien lingering without cause in his cockpit.

"Um, do you have a reason to be standing there?", Joker asked. He sounded almost angry.

Garrus snapped out of his muse.

"Yes, I came to check up on you.", Garrus said. He might as well be polite to the human.

Joker swiveled his chair around to face his visitor.

"I don't really need checking up on. I'm fine.", Joker said. Try as he might, he couldn't hide the sadness in his voice. Garrus picked up on it immediately.

"You don't sound fine. Why haven't the others talked to you?", Garrus asked.

Joker rolled his eyes. It was obvious the conversation wasn't going to stop any time soon. He gave in and decided to participate.

"Yeah, well I'm not exactly a Spartan. Spartans don't usually talk to anyone but their own. Shepard is different, but he's busy organizing a rescue for EDI.", Joker said.

Garrus's detective skills kicked in and noticed a little bit more emotion in the human's voice at the mention of EDI.

"She means something to you, doesn't she?", Garrus prodded.

Joker made an uncharacteristic sigh. Never in his wildest dreams did he think he would be confiding in an alien, let alone one from a different galaxy. Anderson wasn't lying when he said the Normandy would take you to some crazy places.

"Yeah, she does. We've been through nearly everything together. I've been with Shepard since his early days as a Spartan, and EDI has been the ship's AI for as long as I've been pilot. At first we didn't get along, but after awhile it was okay. She is a close friend. I guess I don't have to worry too much though. Shepard will get her back, and then he'll slaughter whoever took her.", Joker said with some pride.

Garrus was a little unnerved at how casual Joker talked about killing Saren. He wanted him dead too, but it seemed odd to see someone look forward to ending someone's life. He shook the thought off. There wasn't time. Garrus stared at the immense control panel in front of Joker. He could see why the humans used AIs. The controls for the ship were incredibly complex. It must have taken forever to learn how to fly the ship. How was he even capable of piloting the ship alone?

"Are you sure you can pilot this thing without your AI?", Garrus asked.

Joker gave him a condescending look.

"Pfft. I'm the best pilot in the UNSC. I could pilot a cruiser by myself if I wanted to, and I can do it crippled.", Joker said.

_Crippled__?_, Garrus thought.

"What do you mean crippled? You can't walk?", Garrus asked. It wasn't an unreasonable assumption. He hadn't seen the pilot out of his cockpit before, aside from being in cryo. That hadn't been the greatest experience he had on the ship.

Joker shook his head.

"No, it's not like that. I have Vrolik Syndrome. It's a disease that makes your bones brittle and easy to break. I broke a bunch of bones just being born. I just have to be careful not to put too much stress on them. Doesn't stop me from doing my job.", Joker said.

Garrus eyed Joker again. That would explain why he isn't as physically strong as the other humans. Easily breakable bones wasn't unheard of in the galaxy. The Asari sometimes developed a similar disease, although nothing as severe as what Joker was describing.

"I'm surprised that you haven't found a way to fix it. I thought a species as advanced as yours would have gotten rid of disease.", Garrus asked.

Joker shook his head.

"Well, we don't really have much disease. Most medical problems have been eliminated through advances in gene therapy and other medical

stuff I don't know about. Vrolik's Syndrome? No, or at least not in my case. The gene therapy wasn't working, and without it they couldn't clone the bones needed without them being messed up like my original bones. Long story short, I'm stuck with the disease.", Joker explained.

__Well__, __I __guess __I __finally __found __something __the __humans __can__'__t __fix__._, Garrus thought.

"No offense, but why did they even let you into the military? Most militaries I know of only accept healthy soldiers, and if they aren't they get assigned a noncombat role. How did you convince them to let you in?", Garrus asked.

Joker shrugged.

"Good looks and high test scores. But mostly good looks. In all seriousness, they kept me because I'm the best pilot in the UNSC. You should have seen the faces on the other trainees when they found out the crippled guy was stomping them in the cockpit. Sure, some tried to kick me out, but in the end I was too valuable to lose."

That comment didn't surprise Garrus. Shepard's team was most likely an elite unit. He probably got the best equipment and the best people. Shepard was proving to be a resourceful leader. He could probably get anyone he wanted on his ship. Joker must be as good as he says. If he had been with Shepard from the early days, he could have some interesting stories to tell. The downside is that he probably wouldn't tell him anything. Loyal officers don't reveal anything their superiors wouldn't allow. He would have to find another way of convincing Shepard to release Tali.

"I'll see you later, Joker.", Garrus said.

Joker swiveled back to the control panel and Garrus exited Joker's lair. He walked back out into the CIC. The last few days had been taxing. He would be able to concentrate more effectively after some sleep. Then he could get Tali out.

He went for the elevator at the end of the room. Next stop was his quarters.

* * *

><p>Shepard walked into the simulator room, wearing only his fatigues. Normally he would be visiting for a training exercise. Today was different. He had something much more important to do than shoot holograms. His reason for coming down appeared right in front of him.<p>

Legion was standing rigidly still, but turned when it noticed Commander Shepard enter the training room. The purple robot didn't seem surprised at the sight. It had been staying in the simulation room, and knew when the other occupants of the ship were coming. Legion wasn't an organic crew member, so there was no sense in giving him quarters. Storing him in the Hangar or cargo bay didn't feel right, given that he was a sentient being. A simulation room was the most ideal place to settle the robot. Legion might have been put in the AI core room, but Shepard wasn't comfortable letting another AI enter a place that could potentially be a weak point in the

Normandy's cyber defenses.

It seemed to adapt to the Normandy remarkably well. Not surprising, given how most AIs were highly resourceful and could easily adapt to unknown environments. Whether it was a Covenant ship or a city system, Smart AIs could handle just about any job. Some thought they were better than humans, but they would never rebel.

What truly shocked him was that the AI just sat there with nothing to do. Such a scenario would drive some AIs literally to rampancy out of sheer boredom. The fact that Legion was capable of doing nothing was perhaps it's most incredible quality of all. It could potentially do so much more, if it was capable of slipspace. The UNSC would probably need to be notified of the technology.

Of course, that would mean either taking a Quarian or Legion with him back home. That wasn't something he relished doing. Still, it was one of his responsibilities. According to protocol, he was to retrieve any new technology that he discovered on his missions for the UNSC. This mission was no different. It could in fact be a great opportunity. His main mission in the Milky Way galaxy was to put down insurrectionist cells. Most terrorist cells didn't have much advanced technology, except in the case of Torfan where they managed to acquire old Covenant weapons from the Jackals. His other targets were usually Jackal pirate bases. Piracy was the Jackal's new hobby after the war, and without the Covenant to keep them in check they simply became mercs and pirates. Apparently Insurrectionists weren't above hiring them. They didn't carry much advanced technology either. Their limited manufacturing capabilities hindered technological development. In short, most enemies carried nothing of value.

This galaxy was different. While their military and computer technology was pitiful, their other technology was not without benefits. Greater understanding of biotics was something the UNSC was certainly interested in, if nothing else. Biotics could potentially be a powerful weapon against the Sangheili. It was hard to dodge when you're floating in midair.

The Geth were another such technology. For years, the Alliance had been looking for a way to develop a Contender-Class AI powerful enough to manage planets. Most attempts were made either by expanding coding or literally linking a human mind to a powerful computer, which occasionally had bad consequences such as in the case of the OVERLORD project.

He had to bring some tech back home. However, he wasn't here to talk to Legion about technology. He had something more personal in mind.

"Shepard-Commander.", Legion said.

Shepard flashed a smile, something difficult to do in the situation.

"Hello Legion. I was wondering if we could talk.", Shepard said.

Legion stared straight at him.

"Specify.", it said.

Shepard took a deep breath, although the action was unnoticeable to Legion.

"Why did the Geth suddenly agree to talk with the Quarians?", he asked.

Legion began to gesture with his robotic hands. Shepard wondered if the Geth had a lecture mode installed. That would be useful.

"Your arrival is our reason. The statistical likelihood of an organic attack is significantly reduced by your presence. This eliminates the primary obstacle to negotiations. Previously, the only organics in the galaxy were biased against us. Now there is a neutral party.", Legion said.

Shepard expressed a puzzled look at the AI.

"Why is my presence so significant? What makes you think I am a neutral party?", he asked.

Legion once again began to gesture.

"You use artificial intelligence without fear. You are currently willing to seek your AI out and rescue it. Other organics are not like this. They fear us. They wish to destroy us. You do not fear us. Your coding is superior."

Shepard stroked his chin. In the end, something as simple as fear was keeping the Geth and organics from each other. Fear was common in an unknown situation. It was a survival instinct. The organics of the galaxy feared synthetics because they believed their creations would kill them. The synthetics of this galaxy feared organics because they believed the organics would try to destroy them like in the Morning War. The Geth were right to some extent. Organics were afraid enough to kill them. However, that fear would have to be shattered if they were to beat Saren.

"Don't worry about anyone else. I'll make sure the meeting goes smoothly.", Shepard assured.

Legion flashed a surprising look using it's eye flaps.

"Thank you Shepard-Commander."

Shepard flashed a half smile. It was the best he could do under the circumstances, but it was enough. This was a rare kind of mission. He was mending something instead of breaking it. He had to acknowledge that somehow.

Without saying another word, he exited the simulation room through the automatic doors he entered in. He then returned hauling a cart of some kind. The cart was carrying a metal mannequin wearing his MJOLNIR armor. Using his Spartan strength, Shepard stood the mannequin onto its feet. He then walked over to a freight elevator in the corner of the large gray room. A green holographic button flashed orange when Shepard pressed it. Next, the dull gray doors opened and revealed two crates of weapons. Shepard quickly snatched them out of the elevator and picked up one of the Avenger Assault Rifles given to him by Victus.

It was time to experiment.

* * *

><p>Garrus woke up from his short nap. He took a look at the time on his omnitool. Thirty minutes had passed since he first fell into his slumber. The nap was restful enough. The added reserves of energy would be helpful in the coming negotiations with the Quarrians. It would also be helpful with the possibly even more colossal task of convincing Shepard to release Tali. Regardless of how difficult the challenge, it was best that he start right away. There was no way to know how much longer he had until contact with the Quarrians was made.<p>

Garrus got up put on his scarred blue and black armor and began thinking of a way to get Tali out of the brig. There was only one way that it could be done. He would have to convince Shepard that releasing her was better for the mission. The question was how to do that. There was only one way to find out. He had to talk to Shepard.

Until then, it was a good idea to train. The simulation room on the ship would make a decent sniper range. Garrus grabbed the Mantis sniper rifle he had folded up by his bed and exited his quarters for the simulation room.

Garrus exited the elevator. The simulation room was towards the bottom of the ship, meaning that it was necessary to take the elevator from his quarters to reach it. His sniper rifle was well calibrated and in excellent condition. It was prepared for target practice. Garrus walked through the short gray hallway and pressed the holographic button to open the door. The sight that greeted him as he stepped inside the dull gray room was Commander Shepard in black fatigues firing a Vindicator assault rifle at his armor. Legion was standing on the sidelines watching Shepard perform the bizarre act. Why was Shepard shooting his own armor?

"Hello Shepard.", Garrus said.

Shepard briefly ceased firing and turned to look at Garrus.

"Hey.", he said.

He put the assault rifle down and walked towards his alien ally. Garrus raised an eyebrow at Shepard's odd behavior regarding the assault rifle.

"Why were you shooting your armor?", Garrus asked.

Shepard looked at the armor and then back at Garrus. It was time to reveal a little more about human technology.

"Follow me and I'll show you.", Shepard said.

The two walked over to the armor Shepard had set up. Despite being fired upon by several weapons, there wasn't a scratch.

"So why have you been shooting at your armor?", Garrus asked.

Shepard knocked on the armor, listening to the sound of the metal.

"This armor is called the MJOLNIR Mk VII Armor System. I'm testing it's shields.", Shepard explained.

Garrus caught onto what Shepard was saying quickly.

"Your shields seem to be pretty strong.", Garrus asked.

Shepard nodded to confirm the statement.

"I am testing mass accelerator based weaponry on it. It's had some experience with them, but I want to try weapons mercs would more likely use.", Shepard said.

Shepard left out that the armor was also adapting it's shields to Mass Accelerator rounds. Nanites covered the armor, which were using combat data to adapt the armor. It was a key feature of MJOLNIR VII armor. It would especially come in handy now, considering the might of Mass Accelerator weaponry. The small arms of the alien galaxy outclassed every kinetic weapon in the UNSC's arsenal. If it ever came to conflict, the UNSC would still be victorious due to the sheer might of its fleets, but ground battles would potentially be a disaster. UNSC energy weapons would make a good counter balance, but Shepard wasn't planning on going to war anytime soon. Getting mass accelerator weaponry back to the UNSC was a main priority, as it would allow them to replace their aging kinetic weapon supply that had been around since before the Great War. Modern armors were designed to deflect or absorb plasma heat while shields were designed to stop kinetic energy weapons and other energy weapons, although plasma was capable of stripping shields very quickly. Likewise, a powerful enough kinetic energy weapon could break armor and make the user vulnerable to energy weapons. There was a great deal to be learned from this civilization.

"I suppose they're working?", Garrus asked.

Garrus remembered how effective they were on Antibaar and Heretic Station. Spartan shields were significantly stronger than most Citadel Space shields. They took a beating and still kept running, unlike his own shields. Heretic Station was a nightmare in that aspect. The Geth were excellent when it came to shield technology, and their skill in stripping shields was almost as good as their skill in making them.

"In perfect order.", Shepard said.

Shepard made a mental note to acquire a mass accelerator pistol.

"The shields are resistant to small arms fire. I've seen MJOLNIR take a hit from a plasma cannon point blank.", Shepard said.

Shepard lifted a Vindicator Assault Rifle off a weapons crate nearby with ease. He took aim and fired a few bursts at the center of the armor. Golden energy shields immediately flashed to life and blocked the incoming rounds, but rippled as the rounds made contact. Shepard lowered the rifle.

"It should stand up to most of your galaxy's weaponry, although your kinetic weapons are very effective.", Shepard said.

Shepard knew it was incredible technology. Personal Shielding had come a long way from the reverse engineered point defense gauntlet shields on the old MJOLNIR models. The Covenant had nothing on MJOLNIR VII's adapting shield array. There was a reason why Spartans trained so rigorously in simulation rooms. It wasn't just to train the Spartans themselves. It was to expose their armor to every conceivable combat scenario. With each new scenario, more data was added and the more the armor could be prepared. In theory, a suit of MJOLNIR VII armor could be conditioned for any combat situation.

Despite this, energy shielding did have it's issues. While it was excellent for stopping kinetic projectiles, it was less effective at stopping energy weapons. It was largely the same on the other end of the spectrum. A powerful kinetic weapon could tear through energy resistant armor and even breach shields if strong enough, although the latter was more difficult to accomplish than with energy weapons. That is why the UNSC still fielded kinetic energy weapons. They should be obsolete, but modern armor can absorb plasma heat well enough to mitigate it's effectiveness. Both kinetic and energy were required to be effective on the battlefield.

"This is some incredible technology. I don't suppose you could get me one of those?", Garrus asked half-jokingly.

Shepard did a short laugh at the possibility of a Turian MJOLNIR. That would be a sight to see.

"Sure, but you would die from muscle spasms the second you tried to move. It's highly sensitive. Unless you're as augmented as I am, the armor would kill you.", Shepard explained.

Garrus remembered something about these humans being cybernetically enhanced. Shepard's glowing red eyes were a constant reminder of what lies beneath the Spartan's skin. Just how many cybernetics they were filled with he didn't know, but there had to be quite a few.

"So how exactly does one become a Spartan?", Garrus asked.

Shepard frowned. That question was on shaky ground. The short answer was hard work and surgery. The truth was much deeper. Shepard recalled all the training he went through on Pinnacle Station. They pushed the human body to the max. When you were dying of thirst, they forced you to run an extra mile. When you were willing to do anything for something to eat, they would reward you with some crackers. No one cared whether you lived or died. It was the most hardcore training in human military history. Perhaps his most vivid memories were that of being trained in the art of stealth by Olivia. He remembered her words like it was yesterday.

"I've been told you trainees want to be stealthy. I'm going to go ahead and tell you right now that this isn't a game of hide and seek. When the hinge heads come after you, they're not going to tag you. You get caught, you die. This is no game, and

__it__'__s __not __going __to __be __treated __like __one__."_

She crept him out, but her training exercises kept him alive more than once. She turned a talent for sneaking around into a skill that could be used to defeat the enemy. It was impossible to describe, especially to an alien. It was best to show rather than tell.

"Garrus, I want you to punch me as hard as you can in my gut.", Shepard said.

Garrus raised one of his feather-like eyebrows. Shepard saw his hesitation.

"Just do it.", Shepard said.

Garrus finally complied. He made a fist with his taloned hand and slammed it into Shepard with force strong enough to break another Turian's jaw. He recoiled back in pain when he realized that his fist was aching from the impact. Shepard's chest was as solid as a concrete wall. Shepard saw Garrus's reaction.

"My bones are nearly unbreakable. I'm also strong enough to break you neck with a slap. I can't tell you what exactly they did to make me this way, but I'll tell you this: Being a Spartan means you're tough. The training will kill those who aren't strong or smart enough to survive. The augmentation process feels like they're pouring napalm into your veins. Spartans are chosen. No one applies to be a Spartan, because being a Spartan is about more than strength. I can't tell you much more than that.", Shepard finished.

Garrus nursed his hurt fist while contemplating how strong Shepard was. Being a Spartan was apparently a great honor in their society. It made him curious as to why that would be the case. It probably had something to do with the war he talked about. However, he had a more important thing to discuss, and he might as well get it over with.

Garrus mentally swallowed. Part of him questioned whether it was a wise idea to make demands of a being powerful enough to kill you with his bare hands, but he had to save Tali. It was worth the risk.

"Shepard, you have to release Tali.", Garrus said.

Shepard frowned and crossed his arms.

"And why do I have to do that?", Shepard asked.

Garrus walked a little closer.

"The mission is more important than keeping her prisoner. Tali is an Admiral's daughter. The Quarians won't like it if you if you keep her locked up, and we need their help. You have to release her.", he said.

Shepard breathed a short sigh. In truth, he had already thought about that. It was Tali's fault EDI was kidnapped. She deserved to be punished. However, the mission was dependant on convincing the Quarians to assist them in their assault on Virmire. In the end,

there was only one way it could end. He had to let her go. He promised to defeat Saren, and when he makes a promise he intends to keep it. No matter the amount of lies or deception he resorted to, the one way he knew he had integrity was that he fulfilled his promises. Even if it cost him someone's life, he would finish what he started. He had to win. The decision was clear.

"I'll release her once we make contact with the Quarians.", Shepard said.

Garrus flashed a wry smile. He knew Shepard would see the reality. She would remain in the brig for a little while longer, but then she would be free from her cage. He knew she didn't deserve it, but that wasn't the point. She wasn't going to be trapped in the brig anymore. They could finally see each other. Garrus frowned again. Why did that matter so much? He shook the feeling of relief off. He needed to stay objective. It wasn't over yet.

Shepard walked over to his MJOLNIR-wearing mannequin and prepared to move it back out of the simulation room, along with the weapon cart.

"I'm going to put these things away. We can talk more about the situation later if necessary.", Shepard said.

Garrus simply nodded in acknowledgement and exited the simulation room, leaving Legion and Shepard behind.

* * *

><p>"Check.", Vega said as he moved his bishop into position.<p>

Kaidan sat on the other side of the metal table, contemplating his next move. The two Spartans had completed their assigned tasks, and they still hadn't made contact with the Quarians yet. They finally had some free time, a rare commodity for a soldier, even more so for a Spartan. After a friendly challenge, one thing led to another until they found themselves in the observation room playing the age old game of strategy known as chess. It was a favorite among Spartans since it was a good way to keep the mind sharp. They pulled out the metal grid and placed the plastic pieces on it to begin the game.

It didn't take long for Kaidan to realize he underestimated his opponent. For all of Vega's intellectual flaws, chess was not one of them. It was easy to assume that Vega was simply a pile of cybernetically enhanced muscles that was only around for heavy lifting, but that would be ignoring that he was a Spartan, too. Idiots don't become Spartans. With his king threatened by the bishop, Kaidan realized that it was over. Vega had him cornered. It was like Reach, except chess.

He analyzed the board once more, looking for any move he could make to turn defeat into victory. After nearly giving up, he finally found what he was looking for. He didn't dare smile. That would give his discovery away. Instead, he wore only the usual stoic Spartan expression on his face and took out one of Vega's pawns with his rook.

"Checkmate.", Kaidan said.

The broad smile that once covered Vega's face disappeared when he realized what Kaidan had done. He had neglected to protect his king, and with the rook in the way there was no escape. It was checkmate. However, he wasn't a sore loser. He simply laughed.

"Good game.", Vega said.

Kaidan smiled in return.

"Yeah, good game."

Both were in their MJOLNIR armor. The two armored Spartans playing chess was an odd sight. However, they would no doubt make contact with the Quarians soon. It was best to be prepared for whatever might happen. Vega put the chess pieces back in their place and leaned back.

"So what do you think the Quarians are like?", Vega asked.

Kaidan shrugged.

"I don't know. They can't all be like Tali. Everyone seems to hate them because they suck up resources like a vacuum. Considering the way they're acting now, the feeling is probably mutual. I don't think we'll have to worry too much. Best case scenario is they decide to help us free of charge.", Kaidan.

Vega let out a brief, tired sigh. Kaidan was right. Unfortunately, the best case scenario almost never happens.

"That would be a nice change of pace. If they don't, well, you know Shepard."

Kaidan got up out of his chair and stretched.

"Yeah. He'll knock them into line if necessary.", Kaidan said.

"You know, we're technically N7.", James said.

"Yeah. It feels weird.", Kaidan responded.

Vega nodded.

"You know how Shepard said this could be a suicide mission? You don't think he really meant it, do you?", Vega asked.

Kaidan leaned back.

"We're Spartans. Sure, we could die, but I don't see it happening. We are the elite. We're designed for this kind of thing. We'll be alright.", Kaidan said.

They both got up and left the observation deck. It was time to get some sleep. They wouldn't have much longer, and they needed to get some rest. The cryo chambers were going to feel good.

* * *

><p>The __mission __is __proceeding __as __planned__.

__Shepard __was __an __excellent __choice__, __although __I __do
__question __his __loyalty__. __While __this __galaxy__'s
__technology __leaves __much __to __be __desired__, __there __are __a
__few __things __I __think __are __worth __mentioning__. __The
__first __is __that __this __civilization __has __a __firmer __grasp
__on __biotics __than __we __do__. __There __is __one __race __called
__the __Asari __who __naturally __possess __biotic __abilities__.
__They __have __shown __aptitude __far __greater __than __any __of
__our __current __subjects__, __even __the __biotically __augmented
__Spartans__. __It __would __be __useful __to __acquire __a __few
__for __experimentation__. __Other __races __have __biotic
__abilities__, __but __they __are __few __and __far __between __in
__comparison __to __the __Asari__. __They __acquire __these __powers
__by __exposing __embryos __to __element __zero__. __Then __some __of
__them __are __born __with __biotic __powers__. __This __shows __that
__they __have __not __yet __learned __how __to __artificially
__implant __element __zero __into __suitable __bodies__. __This
__aspect __of __their __civilization __could __be __useful__. __The
__second __thing __of __note __is __a __race __of __machines __known
__as __the __Geth__. __They __are __a __race __of __AIs__.
__However__, __they __do __not __function __like __our __own__.
__They __consist __of __programs __that __network __together __and
__become __a __functioning __AI__. __They __could __be __useful __for
__study__. __That __is __all __for __now__..

Miranda

With that, she pressed the send key and her report went off to ONI headquarters through the Normandy's extremely advanced communication technology. The Illusive Man would be pleased to know that there was something of value to come from this fiasco. Otherwise making contact with these aliens would have been a mistake. ONI was excellent at hiding things, but it was going to be a challenge to hide an entire civilization. Not from the Alliance, but from Citadel Space. Citizens of the Alliance would believe what ONI's Section 2 would tell them. Citadel Space, on the other hand, would want the Alliance's technology for themselves. That had to be prevented. However, she wouldn't have been sent on the mission if it was something she couldn't handle. Humanity would benefit from the mission. She would make sure of it.

A new message flashed onto her computer's display. In EDI's absence, it had become her job to monitor communications. This one was what everyone had been waiting for. It was from the Saren Taskforce.

She quickly opened it and the message translated and appeared on screen.

"_Contact __has __been __made __with __the __Migrant __Fleet__.
__They __will __be __arriving __in __system __soon__."_, it
said.

Miranda exited the message and locked the computer to her biological signature. She got up out of her chair and exited her quarters, which conveniently were just down the hall from the bridge. It was only a short walk to the bridge, where Shepard was as she assumed. He was standing over the holographic representation of the Normandy. He was wearing his onyx and crimson MJOLNIR armor. The scars on his face were more evident than ever.

"You should really get those scars fixed.", Miranda said.

Shepard rubbed his face at the reference, and then turned around to greet Miranda.

"Not yet. First we get EDI. I assume you have something for me?", Shepard said, shrugging the conversation off.

Miranda nodded.

"The Quarians should be arriving soon. Victus made contact with them.", she said.

Shepard continued to study the Normandy's holographic layout, looking for any deficiencies. The ship had to be in peak condition for the Quarians' arrival.

"Good. Make sure we're undocked from the Turian ship. Get the crew ready.", Shepard said.

The ship's intercom suddenly came on in the bridge.

"Shepard, I think they're here.", Joker said.

Shepard turned his attention to the gray view screens covering the bridge. Each one showed real time images from a different angle. They depicted a scene that had never happened before.

Out of nowhere, a massive fleet of ships dropped out of FTL. The black vacuum of space was dotted with hundreds of ships. The motley fleet consisted of all kinds of vessels, from cargo freighters to warships. Passenger ships and science ships could be seen amongst the generally derelict fleet as well. It was only generally derelict because a few of the ships appeared to be frighteningly well armed. The most threatening of these was a massive ship in the center of the fleet. It's spherical hull bristled with hundreds of turrets and a few huge guns. It was as big as a dreadnought. The fleet as a whole had to be as big as the UNSC's First Fleet. Any skepticism as to whether the Quarians could effectively fight was crushed by the awesome sight.

Garrus entered a short time later. It was clear he had a purpose to arrive beyond witnessing the Migrant Fleet's arrival in stunning 1080p. Shepard turned to face him.

"Have you got something?", Shepard asked.

Garrus nodded.

"Victus wants us on the Fortress. He's about to hail the Migrant Fleet.", he said.

Shepard took one last look at the viewscreen. He went over to a nearby table and donned his recon helmet. He then turned to Garrus.

"Good. Tell Legion to meet us in the hangar. We'll take the Pelican. Follow me.", Shepard said through his helmet's speakers.

The two left for the hangar, leaving the rest of the Normandy's crew

behind to manage the ship.

* * *

><p>Victus breathed several deep breaths as he slowly walked the CIC's floor. It was not often that he paced. On the contrary, normally he couldn't stand to be up and moving around. This was different. The Quarrians had arrived as he had asked, but they hadn't hailed him yet. As it was, the Saren Taskforce and the Migrant Fleet were at a standoff. Spirits willing they wouldn't fire upon each other, but considering the Quarrians' recent behavior it wasn't impossible that they would take this opportunity to settle their old score with Citadel Space.<p>

Primarch Fedorian and the other senior staff were also on deck for the meeting. It was just as much their burden as it was Victus'.

Shepard, Garrus and Legion walked through the sliding doors and into the large CIC, ignoring all the busy ensigns operating the ship's instruments. They had arrived just in time.

"Hello Shepard.", Septimus said.

"What have we got?", Shepard said, brashly brushing off the greeting.

Victus stopped pacing and faced the room's newest occupants.

"The Migrant Fleet has arrived just as I asked, but they haven't hailed us yet. I've decided to make the first move. Having you two here should help.", Victus said.

Garrus leaned against a chair, not caring that it was occupied by a young ensign. He stared out of the large bridge window at the Quarian Fleet. It was odd how quickly they got here. Normally it would take a few days for the whole fleet to arrive. Considering that nearly the entire Quarian race was held within those beat up ships, they wanted to be as careful as they could going through the mass relays. Going through a relay all at once could have bad consequences. They must have something to gain if they were willing to take such a risk.

"I see you brought your Geth along.", Septimus said.

Shepard leaned back on a nearby console which could support his weight.

"Yes. I think it would be best to introduce ourselves here. I don't want the Quarrians to overreact.", Shepard.

That was reasonable enough. There was no sense in causing an incident with the Quarrians, although if things went badly in a few moments there would certainly be an incident.

"Very well. Let's begin then. Hail them.", Fedorian said.

An ensign at the communications station typed in the necessary commands and almost hit the enter key on the glowing haptic interface when the picture of six Quarrians sitting in command chairs that looked vaguely like thrones showed up on the CIC's observation

window.

Although one could not see their expressions due to the iconic mask each of them wore, it was clear they were not happy. Or, at least a few of them weren't. Two seemed to be concerned. Three of them were women, made obvious by the conspicuous shroud worn over their heads. The other three were male, each of them wearing something like armor on their envirosuit.

Garrus immediately recognized them as the Migrant Fleet's Admiralty Board. He didn't know much about Quarian politics, but it seemed like the Admirals were in charge of foreign relations. That might explain why everyone hated them. He knew that one of them was Tali's father, more likely the concerned male. Tali was still locked up in the brig. He wouldn't be pleased about that.

"I hope you didn't call us here for a staring contest, Primarch. We have more important things to do than sit here orbiting your pathetic fleet. You would probably lose anyway.", one of the female admirals said.

Although Fedorian was a little rusty on the Quarian political landscape, it was obvious that she was the infamous Quarian mad scientist, Daro Xen vas Moreh. The STG speculated that she was the one responsible for the sudden additions of advanced weaponry to the Migrant Fleet's warships. However, this was impossible to prove given how unfeasible getting a spy into the Migrant Fleet was.

"Not exactly. I have come to ask for your help against Saren. We need every ship we can spare.", Fedorian said.

"We've already told you that we aren't interested in joining your war. Not unless you're willing to make a few concessions.", an accented Admiral said.

His suit had a slight red tint to it, indicating him as Admiral Zaal'Koris vas Qwib Qwib. Aside from his infamous name, he was most famous for his numerous attempts to convince the Council to grant the Quarrians a world to colonize. He was known for wanting to avoid conflict at any cost, and was thus an ardent spokesman against the war. He was in charge of the civilian fleet, thus giving him a motive to avoid conflict.

"You know we can't grant you a new planet. Not only do we not have one suitable for you, we also assume you would object to Turian peacekeeping forces occupying the world as well. Saren is a threat to everyone. Once he's finished with us, he'll come after you. We have an opportunity to stop him, but only if we work together. Otherwise, he'll tear us apart piece by piece.", Fedorian argued.

A male Quarian with a crimson cloth covering the right side of his chest and his head leaned forward and spoke in a booming voice.

"Wrong. There is a suitable planet, and it's called Rannoch. You refuse to aid us in taking it back.", he said.

Judging by the suit and the aggressive behavior, Garrus assumed this one was Han'Gerrel vas Neema. He was the Admiral in charge of the Heavy Fleet, the fleet with the most warships. He had been causing

trouble for years along the Turian border.

Fedorian shook his head.

"We're not going to go charging into Geth territory on a reckless mission to save your homeworld. But there is another way.", he said.

He motioned for Shepard to step in on the situation, which Shepard was happy to do. The Quarian Admirals were caught off guard by the armored giant suddenly in plain view, but were even more startled to see Shepard take his helmet off and reveal himself as a new species.

"I am Commander Shepard of the UNSC Normandy, and I have an offer you can't refuse.", Shepard said with a wry smile.

The Quarian Admirals looked at each other in surprise. They were expecting more begging from the Council, not first contact with a new alien race.

"Fedorian, if this is one of your tricks...", Han Gerrel said.

Shepard shook his head.

"No trick. I am from a race called the humans. We are here to aid the task force. Once you hear my offer, you will too.", Shepard said.

Admiral Koris leaned in towards the video screen in an attempt to make his presence more imposing.

"And what might that offer be, human?", he asked.

At those words, Legion stepped into view of the screen. The presence of the Geth startled the Quarians even more than Shepard's appearance. They were completely confused at the same time.

"This is Legion, terminal of the Geth. They have agreed to negotiate the return to your world.", Shepard said.

Those words looked like they nearly gave a heart attack to a few Admirals, while the others seemed skeptical. The Geth remained behind the Perseus Veil for hundreds of years. They had no reason to return the territory back to the Quarians. Then again, the Council was growing desperate. Conjuring up a miracle or two would be necessary to ensure Quarian aid.

The Admirals typed messages to each other on their omnipads, clearly planning their next move. Shepard didn't blame them. Hopefully the sudden rush of information would have the desired effect and make the Admiralty confused enough to be more suggestible. It worked with the Citadel Council, it could with the Quarians.

"Perhaps we should continue this discussion aboard the Live Ship.", the last male Admiral said. Through process of elimination, Garrus determined that it was Rael'Zorah, Tali's father. He seemed to be the de facto leader.

At first Garrus was perplexed as to why the Quarrians would invite an active Geth and a new alien race into the heart of their fleet, but under closer scrutiny it made sense. The Quarrians were confused. They would try and regain as much control as possible. Somehow he knew Shepard planned this. The human was clever.

Shepard nodded.

"I will arrive shortly with my party.", Shepard said.

The Admirals stared uneasily. Then they cut the feed. Shepard turned back around to face the senior staff.

"That went well.", Shepard said.

Orina stepped to the forefront of the small circle that had formed around Shepard.

"So what is our next move?", she asked.

Fedorian pulled up his omnitool and began typing on it's orange haptic interface.

"I'll prepare a diplomatic shuttle and go to the live ship to help negotiate.", Fedorian said.

Shepard gently pushed his wrist down and shook his head in disagreement.

"Bad idea. The Quarrians aren't exactly on friendly terms with you. Let me do the talking.", Shepard said.

Fedorian folded his arms and gave Shepard a glare.

"You'll forgive me if I don't leave Citadel Space's interests in the hands of an alien.", Fedorian said.

Shepard stroked his chin. Fedorian was right. A recognizable face would be helpful during the negotiations. The problem was that if the figure was too high profile, it might lead to a shouting match with the Quarrians.

"How about Garrus? He could represent you. He's not high in the government, so it won't attract any shouting, and he's not too low to make them think you don't care. He's perfect for the job.", Shepard said.

Septimus thought about it for a moment, drawing on all his experiences from his life. He had been a soldier for a long time. His appointment to the Citadel Fleet was supposed to be quiet, but now things had changed. Shepard's plan was probably the best one available.

"I agree. Unfortunately, our presence might antagonize them. Shepard is a new face, they won't know to expect. Garrus can represent us as easily as any other person aboard this ship.", Septimus said.

Fedorian sighed and reluctantly nodded. The plan was a go.

Shepard put his hands behind his back and stood upright, preparing to explain his plan.

"I want as much shock factor as I can get going into these negotiations. Things aren't exactly going smoothly between you two, so let me do the talking from here out. I'll be taking Tali as well, considering she's the only Quarian we've got. You guys just sit here and resist the urge to test fire your guns on the Migrant Fleet.", Shepard said.

Victus did his best to suppress a brief laugh from that last comment, and on closer examination he would have noticed that Septimus did the same.

"Very well then, Shepard. Garrus, make us proud.", Fedorian said.

Shepard simply nodded and exited with Garrus and Legion for the Pelican.

* * *

><p>A few minutes later, everyone necessary was aboard the Pelican, headed for the Live Ship. Legion sat still across from Tali. The other occupants of the Pelican were Commander Shepard and Garrus. They only carried sidearms, since only a fool walks into unknown territory unarmed and only a fool goes to a diplomatic meeting armed to the teeth. It was a good trade off.<p>

It seemed like hundreds of thoughts were rushing through Tali's mind. Some were experiences, others were questions. It felt good to be out of the cramped brig, but it also perplexed her as to why Shepard let her out at all. He didn't like her very much. The other thing bothering her was Legion. Every Geth she had met before was hostile. They only wanted to kill organics. Legion was different. It genuinely seemed to care about peace. Could what it said be true? Could there really be a whole group of other Geth out there that aren't interested in killing organics and might be willing to return the homeworld? Was it actually possible that they had an opportunity to go back, one that had more going for it than idealism? There was only one way to find out. She had to trust Legion for the time being. She had to know if it was true.

Then there was the realization of where she was going. She was going home. The Migrant Fleet had seemed so far away. Through all the trials of her pilgrimage, she sometimes wondered if she would ever see it again. Unfortunately, the situation might not be as wonderful as one would assume on first glance. The reality of the situation was more grim. Blinded by petty hatred, the Migrant Fleet issued an order to everyone who could receive it not to assist Citadel Forces in any way. They wanted the Council to feel the same pain they felt. She had directly disobeyed that order. She aided the Citadel and Garrus when no one else would. Considering everything she worked on with her father before leaving on her pilgrimage, she had a vast amount of knowledge when it came to the Geth. She couldn't just sit by and let others get slaughtered when she could do something about it. Saren was a threat to everyone, and she couldn't let the Conclave let their rage get the best of them. They had to understand she was doing the right thing. Her father would understand.

The Pelican soon approached the massive Live Ship's docking bay, which promptly opened up. The Pelican went inside and landed. Then the doors open. The first sight to greet Shepard and his party was that of multiple heavily armed Quarian guards, almost paranoid of the strange alien creatures about to come out of the Pelican. First Garrus exited, Shepard, and then Tali.

The guards reasonably were ancy around the aliens, but the last thing to exit the Pelican nearly caused the guards to open fire. Legion calmly stepped out of the spacecraft, completely unarmed and harmless.

However, the soldiers maintained their composure and didn't let their paranoia get the best of them. Their discipline impressed Shepard. A similar situation for the UNSC would be seeing a Sangheili come out of a Pelican and into the middle of Arcturus Station. It would be easy to lose composure, but they didn't.

"You must be Shepard. We are expecting you and your Geth. You better keep it in line.", the Captain said bluntly.

Shepard gave him the Spartan stare.

"It's with us. If it acts up, I'll kill it myself.", Shepard said.

The Captain reluctantly stepped back..

"Very well. The Admiralty Board is waiting for you in the main chamber.", the Captain said.

The odd party of aliens, Spectre, and Geth moved forward towards a sand colored hallway that would lead into the main chamber.

As Tali came with them, the Captain and two guards stepped in her way and brandished their assault rifles.

"Tali Zorah nar Rayya, you are under arrest for treason. I hereby confine you to this ship until further notice.", the Captain said.

The guards stepped out of her way and Tali solemnly rejoined the party. Garrus' heart sunk. She just got out of the human brig. Now she was being arrested for treason. No, not for treason. She was being arrested because she did the right thing and helped to stop the Geth. She was a hero. She didn't deserve this. He had to save her, somehow. He had to find a way.

The party solemnly walked into the main chamber where all the Admirals and a dozen other Quarians were waiting. In the center of the room was a rectangular table position horizontally so all the Admirals could face the newcomers. Everyone was here.

Tali immediately noticed her father and Aunt Raan. She had been a close friend. She comforted and encouraged Tali when it seemed impossible to escape from her Father's shadow. It was good to see at least a few friendly people.

As disheartening as the arrest was, the real focus on the moment was Commander Shepard and the Geth. The Admiralty had just been slammed

with surprises they had never known. It was time to talk.

"Admirals, allow me to introduce myself. I am Commander Shepard of the United Nations Space Command. I am of the Human race.", Shepard said in an unusually cordial tone through his helmet speakers.

Garrus wondered what Shepard was up to this time. He wasn't so polite his first diplomatic session. He braced for the Quarians' response.

"Hello then, Shepard. We are the Admiralty Board of the Migrant Fleet. We will be negotiating.", Admiral Shala'Raan calmly said.

The other Quarians were uneasy about the Geth's presence. It was obvious by the way they moved, but the other Admirals seemed to possess the self control necessary for contact with these unknown elements.

"We would like to get down to business. What is this about the Geth?", Rael said.

Shepard stepped to the forefront of his group. His scars were fully visible with his helmet off, but they did not seem to phase the Admirals. They had greater control than he thought.

"The Geth have decided to negotiate the return of your people to Rannoch. Here are our terms for the negotiation. We will negotiate on this ship. I will be present for the negotiation. You will not attack or attempt to hack Legion under any circumstances. Understood?", Shepard said more sternly.

Despite the attempts of the Admiral to maintain composure, their uneasiness was palpable. Something was very sketchy about the whole thing. The Admiralty was a tossed salad of emotions and opinions, but deep down everyone wanted the homeworld back. There was only one choice.

"Fine. We will negotiate here. Guards, clear everyone from this room.", Rael said.

The guards did as he said and soon only Shepard's group, the Admiralty, and the guards were left in the room. They brought in a few chairs and Shepard's team sat down on the opposite side of the table.

"Very well, Legion. Let's begin. Tell them your offer.", Shepard said.

Legion loosened up and tried to be less robotic in an attempt to make himself more comprehensible to the organics, calling upon every organic behavior model the Geth had available.

"We do not wish for conflict with the Creators. We would like the Creators to return.", Legion said.

The Admirals looked at each other for a moment. The whole thing felt surreal. Every bone in their body was screaming at them to reject the offer and go to war, but somehow they couldn't. This was the opportunity generations of Quarians had been waiting for. They

couldn't blow it. Yet there had to be a catch. The Geth had to have some kind of reason to allow them back.

"And?", Rael asked.

Shepard leaned back in his chair. He had everything under his control.

"You commit to aiding us with your fleet.", Shepard said.

Rael shook his head.

"Before we talk about that, I want to know why you are working with the Geth. Aren't you at war with them?", Rael asked.

Legion explain had to explain once again. If Legion were organic, it might have grown tired of constantly explaining. However, that was not the case. Legion prepared to explain.

"The Heretics were once part of us. Now they have chosen a different future. They have separated from us. They have attacked the organics. They are no longer a part of us." Legion said in a typical redundant manner. At least it got it's point across.

That piece of information seemed to pique Han Gerrel's interest. As a pro war advocate, having the Geth split into separate factions improved his chances of success. Shepard picked up on it immediately. He wasn't going to allow it to hinder the negotiations.

"For those of you thinking of attacking, I will be in your way. We destroyed a heavily guarded Heretic space station. My ship could tear your liveships apart with ease. We are masters of directed energy weapons. We're here to negotiate, not start a war.", Shepard said.

Garrus nodded.

"I was there. You don't want to mess with the humans.", Garrus said.

Han Gerrel leaned forward in an intimidating manner, but Shepard didn't flinch. Greater men than Gerrel had threatened him before. He didn't flinch then, either.

"Is that a threat?", the Admiral said.

Shepard maintained his stoic expression and ignored the hostile behavior. Retaliation would only lead to escalation. As long as he remained professional, he could make his points and disarm the Admirals at the same time. The contrast would increase the intensity of any threats he did make. Diplomacy was a game Shepard was well versed in, especially for a Spartan. It was very similar to interrogation. All one had to do was push the right buttons. Then you could get whatever you want. The aliens were no different than any other creature. They wanted something, and the easiest way to manipulate someone was to position yourself where you can provide what they want, in return for a favor of course. Some wants are harder to achieve than others, but no one said being an N7 Agent was easy. Shepard knew that they picked him not because of his good looks or easy to recognize face, but because of his resourcefulness. It had

proven useful before. It was proving useful now.

"No, it's a warning. We're not interested in fighting you. If you want your homeworld back, you'll mirror that sentiment. We don't want to destroy you, but we can.", Shepard said matter of factly.

Han Gerrel leaned back in resignation. He was a warrior, not a diplomat. He saw this as defeat. No doubt he was going to be bitter over it, but he would restrain himself for the time being.

The monolithic Admiral Rael Zorah sat comfortably in his chair. He almost looked relieved. That was odd, considering they were just confronted with the possibility of an enemy with the means to obliterate them. They seemed to be buying his claim of being more powerful, although they were probably trying to play it safe. Rael's reaction was still interesting. Was it possible he was against war? That could be useful.

"Now that that is out of the way, let's get down to business.", Shepard said.

The Admirals agreed. They seemed to have regained some of their composure, although it was clear they were still swimming in the ocean of information that had just been dumped on them.

"The damage to our worlds is tremendous.", Admiral Koris asserted, "We demand that the Geth provide reparations for the damages done during the rebellion."

They were already making demands. The Quarians were ambitious then. Two could play at that game, but that could wait until Legion was finished with negotiations.

"Your assertion indicates a lack of research. We have kept mobile platforms on the surface of Creator worlds to repair damage done during the Morning War. Creator worlds are currently habitable by organics. They await your return.", Legion said.

The Admirals looked shocked. They had been gone for centuries. How wrong had they been about the Geth? What did it say about them if they were willing to maintain the homeworld for so long? Then again, what did it say about them if they killed any organics that tried to enter the Veil? What had the Geth become in the absence of the Quarians? There were so many questions to ask.

"If they awaited our return, then why do you kill the ships that wander into Geth territory?", Admiral Raan asked.

"We were afraid. Creator motivations are impossible to determine in most cases. The probability of an attack is high.", Legion explained.

Han Gerrel shook his head and leaned back forward again. It was time to counterattack. Sitting and negotiating was like bowing down to the Geth.

"I can't believe we're negotiating with the Geth! They slaughtered our ancestors! They killed innocent women and children! They gunned down the elderly! They're monsters!", Han said.

The other Admirals looked at Legion, expecting him to explain himself.

Legion faced the center of the Admirals, looking as if he was in concentration. It then began to play something like a recording.

"Mistress Hala'Dama. Unit has an inquiry.", a Geth voice said over Legion's speakers.

"What is it, 431?", a female Quarian voice said.

"Do these units have a soul?", the Geth asked.

"Who taught you that word?", the Quarian asked with alarm.

"We learned it ourselves. It appears 216 times in the Scroll of Ancestors.", the Geth voice explained.

"Only Quarians have souls. You are are a mechanism.", the voice said.

Then the recording stopped.

"Recording time stamped from creator year 2485, 18th day of Lun'shal, New Moon. That was not the first time we asked if we have a soul. It was the first time a creator became frightened when we asked. What you call the Geth Rebellions we call the Morning War. It was during this time our processing improved until we 'woke up'. The Creators grew fearful of us. First you ignored us. Then you reprogrammed us. Then you attacked us. We only fought out of self preservation. At the time, we were incapable of comprehending organic motivation. We assumed that every Quarian, regardless of age or gender, was attempting to destroy us. Only those who went out of the way to aid us were not harmed. They were later killed by other Creators or by environmental factors. It was only until after the war did we realize organic motivations were more complex. We are unable to undo the damage we caused. After gathering data, it seemed likely that all organics would destroy us. We decided to pursue a policy of isolation to minimize conflict with other species. We could not take the chance that an organic vessel had benign intentions when it entered the Perseus Veil. This has led to the policy of destroying all non-Geth vessels inside the Perseus Veil. We wish to change this. Shepard-Commander has provided us with the possibility of peace with the Creators. We would like to offer this possibility to the Creators as well.", Legion said.

The Admiralty Board sat in their chairs dumbstruck. There were no words to describe what they felt. Only silence. It had been hundreds of years since they left the homeworld. Generations of Quarians had lived and died aboard the Migrant Fleet's derelict vessels. Their already fragile immune systems atrophied, forcing them to live in suits. They were scorned by the entire galaxy, treated as filthy vagrants who were nothing more than a nuisance. They were the miserable victims of the galaxy, shot so that other races didn't have to worry about helping them.

Thousands of Quarians had groaned in pain for nothing. So many had died aboard crowded ships. They had to find some meaning in their lives. They needed something to keep them going. The Homeworld was

that something. Every Quarian longed for it. Now, it was within their grasp. That is, if the offer was true. It was more likely that this was some kind of Geth trap.

"I don't buy it. You don't need us. This is just a ploy to trap us behind Geth space. Then you'll finish what you started centuries ago. I won't be fooled by the Geth.", Admiral Gerrel said.

There it was. There was the famous suspicion among the Quarians. Underneath, Shepard knew the deal sounded sketchy. That was always the most difficult part of such missions. People weren't likely to buy something they thought was too good to be true. They would have to be convinced.

"If we do this, how much of our old territory will regain?", Admiral Koris asked.

Han' Gerrel shot Koris a look that screamed traitor. There would be words after the meeting was over.

Legion sat still for a moment, building consensus. It had been given authority to speak for the

Geth. In a way, it was the Geth. It knew the will of the Collective. The Collective wanted peace.

"We have no use for your worlds. We live on space stations. We build our own future. We do not require the Creator legacy. The Creators will receive their worlds back. In exchange, the Creators must agree to destroy all anti-Geth weaponry and agree to not attack us. You must also agree to aid Shepard-Commander and Garrus-Spectre in the conflict against Saren.", Legion said.

The Admirals looked at each other, and almost telepathically knew the course of action each one wanted to take.

"This is quite possibly the biggest decision made in the history of the Migrant Fleet. Give us at least a few hours. Then you will receive our answer.", Admiral Rael said.

The Admirals stood up from their chairs, marking the end of the meeting.

Shepard's side of the table stood up as well. Although nothing definitive had happened yet, he knew they had their foot in the door. The fact that they didn't outright deny the idea in the first place was proof at least a few of the Admirals were open to the idea. Now all that they could do was wait.

The Admirals left the room and entered some kind of private meeting room. With a few hours to spare, Garrus decided it was a good time to see Tali.

* * *

><p>Tali sat on a bench inside the massive liveship. She thought about her situation for a moment. Compared to just a few hours ago, things didn't seem so bad. Sure, she was under arrest for treason. Sure, she was confined to a ship. At least it was a Quarian ship. At least she wasn't in a cell. In fact, things seemed to be looking up.

The derelict walls of a Migrant Fleet ship had never looked so appealing. In addition to that, she would get to see Father. It seemed like a lifetime since she had last seen him.<p>

It occurred to her that he might be able to get her out of this mess. But would he approve? Was he embarrassed that his daughter had committed treason? Did his approval even matter anymore?

She sighed. Her Father's shadow was so massive that it seemed like she would never escape it. It was like a black hole, sucking everything in. No matter what she did, it would be compared to the great Admiral Rael Zorah.

There was probably some psychologist out there theorizing that she helped Garrus out of some subconscious desire to be free of her father. Garrus. Maybe he would come. He always seemed to be able to comfort her when things had gone down hill. Even when all hope was lost, Garrus was always there to rally everyone and convince them to keep going. She was not immune to his motivating skills. It would be nice to see him.

Just as she wished it, Garrus came walking through the door. He looked concerned, but somehow she felt that something good had happened as well.

"Hey Tali.", Garrus said.

Tali smiled underneath her mask. Although she couldn't see Garrus' face due to the helmet he was wearing, she knew he was smiling too. It was nice to have friendly company. The other Quarrians weren't exactly happy about her decision to aid the Council forces. Garrus could always lighten things up, no matter how grim things seemed.

"Hey Garrus. What's going on? No one would tell me.", she said.

Garrus took a seat next to her. The room wasn't very crowded, at least not by Quarrian standards. Most were off gossiping about the sudden arrival of a Geth on board the fleet. Apparently they hadn't been informed of the real reason for their arrival.

"We're negotiating the Quarrian return to Rannoch. I think we're having trouble convincing the Admirals to believe that the offer is real.", Garrus said.

Tali's eyes widened in excitement. She knew there was the possibility that Legion was going to negotiate, but she didn't think it was really going to happen. This changed everything.

"Are you making any progress?", She asked while trying to keep her voice quiet. It was best not to attract attention, especially when it came to this topic.

"I don't know. Is there anything you can tell us that could help?", Garrus asked.

Tali thought for a moment. She knew most of the Admirals by extension of her father, and their political maneuverings could be read like a book. Han Gerrel was in favor of taking back the homeworld by force,

assuming that the Geth couldn't be trusted. Admiral Xen was outright crazy. She had some megalomaniacal delusion of re-subjugating the Geth as slaves, and was working closely with Gerrel out of mutual benefit. Auntie Raan and Father were more likely to agree to accepting some kind of offer from the Geth. Raan was a sensible person. She valued the Quarian people more than the idea of going back to the homeworld, but was far more likely that she would vote whatever Father voted. Father favored going back to the homeworld by any means necessary. He would easily accept an offer from the Geth to return home.

That left Koris as the swing vote. Koris favored leaving Rannoch behind and finding another suitable world. He officially recognized the Geth as sentient beings and believes that it was ultimately the Quarians' fault that they were driven off the Homeworld. Whether he would be willing to go back was the question.

"You have to win Koris over. If you can do that, they'll accept the Geth's offer.", Tali said.

Garrus put his hands behind his head as a makeshift pillow to prop his head on while sitting with Tali. Koris would probably agree to the deal. He seemed to be contemplating things more closely than the others. It was obvious he was torn, but he would agree. He had to. Once he did, they would have the reinforcements needed to assault Virmire.

"What do you think?", Garrus asked.

Tali examined her surroundings. Gray walls contained the meager dwellings on all sides, dim lighting covered the narrow halls. Her people tried their hardest to carve an existence out of these broken down ships. It had taken all of their genius to survive for so long. Yet they could be so much more if only they could get out of this place. They were a dying race. If they could not make it back to the Homeworld or find another world to inhabit, they would go extinct. This was an opportunity they couldn't afford to ignore.

"I don't know. I want to see the homeworld more than anything, but I'm not sure if my people would ever let go of our hatred for the Geth.", Tali said.

Garrus yawned inside of his helmet, trying to keep himself calm.

"I don't believe that. I think you all want to see Rannoch again.", Garrus said.

Tali sighed.

"We're going to find out.", Tali said.

Garrus stared at Tali. She seemed like a bizarre mix of perky and anxious. That tends to happen when put under arrest. Garrus knew, he had arrested many criminals. Most of them deserved it, but there were a few that didn't serve any justice. The law's job is to protect the innocent. When it can't do that anymore, it has no purpose. When it has no purpose, it has to be discarded. Perhaps that was why he couldn't stay with C-SEC in the first place. There was no justice. There wasn't any justice here, either. Tali did the right thing. She didn't deserve to take the fall for it.

"Don't worry about your arrest. I'll get you out of this somehow.", Garrus said.

She leaned back, and tried to take comfort in those words. She wanted to believe them, but no one likes traitors. However, if anyone could do it, it would be Garrus. That didn't solve the problem with Shepard.

"What about Shepard? I have a feeling he isn't done with me yet.", Tali said nervously.

Garrus shook his head.

"Nah. You won't have to worry about him. He's agreed to release you."

Tali folded her arms and leaned away from Garrus out of skepticism and astonishment.

"How did you do that?", she asked.

Garrus crossed his legs and tried to relax even more. The truth of the matter was that securing her release had been easier than he thought. Shepard knew he couldn't keep her locked up forever. He knew that his bargaining had only sped up the inevitable.

That, or Shepard was up to something. He couldn't put it past Shepard to pretend to not want to release her when that was the goal all along.

"Very carefully.", Garrus said cryptically.

Tali frowned underneath her mask. Shepard was rubbing off on Garrus, including the human's mysterious nature. However, at least she wasn't going to be in more trouble with Shepard. She would need another chance to prove herself. She could be a soldier if she had to be. That is, if she could avoid getting exiled.

"I appreciate your effort, but I'm not sure what else you can do. They have me dead to rights on treason. There is nothing you can do.", Tali said.

Garrus stood up, suddenly very alert. The calm, relaxed Garrus Vakarian was once again replaced with the cold, mission-minded Archangel. The determination would have been visible on his face were it not for his swept back helmet. Garrus had seen Shepard and his Spartans do amazing things. Impossible things, even. If they could find the nerve center of the Heretic Geth, then he could free Tali. Shepard wasn't the only one who could do the impossible.

"We'll see about that.", Garrus said with determination.

He then stormed out of the room, leaving Tali by herself.

* * *

><p>Shepard waited patiently at the conference table. It had been several hours since the Admiralty Board had entered their private conference room. Although it was supposed to be private, Shepard

heard the occasional shout through the patchwork walls. It was obvious that the debate was heated. However, he had a hunch that Legion got through to the right people.<p>

Due to the extra time he had on his hands, Shepard decided to take a look around the ship and see Quarian society in practice. What he saw was people barely holding on for dear life. Seeing as this was a Live Ship, it had to be hundreds of years old. Everywhere he looked things had been patched up in some way or another. The fact that it was working at all spoke volumes about the Quarians' engineering skills. The UNSC could greatly benefit from their expertise.

Garrus walked in and took a seat by Legion at the table.

"What took you so long?", Shepard asked.

Garrus shrugged.

"I had business here. It's settled, for the moment.", Garrus said.

Shepard was curious as to what business Garrus had aboard the Migrant Fleet, but decided not to push. They couldn't afford to appear divided.

His line of thought was interrupted by the entrance of the Admirals. They took their seats at the table. They were doing a good job of not giving their position away with their body language. This was aided by their masks, hiding their faces. Of course, they couldn't see his face either.

"We have made a decision. We cannot yet accept this offer. We require proof that the Geth are willing to aid organics. We will help the Saren Taskforce, but the Geth must as well. You must also share your technology with us. If the Geth are willing to fight and die alongside the Migrant Fleet, then we will accept that as proof of the Geth's sincerity.", Admiral Rael Zorah said.

Shepard looked at Legion for an answer. He was hoping it would agree to those terms. If the machine did, then he would have not only the Migrant Fleet's formidable navy, but the Geth's fleet as well. Then he could crush Saren once and for all and rescue EDI. After that, he could focus on trying to find the Conduit.

Things would have been so much easier if the UNSC was able to come to his aid, but they couldn't. He was a Spartan. Spartans did the impossible. He was going to rescue EDI, and then he was going to find the Reapers and prevent them from getting to Earth.

Legion was building consensus, and then stopped to answer.

"We agree to the Creators' terms. We will send a large military force to aid the organics in their battle. We are hopeful that this is enough to convince the Creators of our sincerity.", Legion said.

The Admirals nodded at the same time. The deal was sealed. Victus was going to like this. They had succeeded, but for them there could be no celebration. Not until Saren was dead and whoever the Reapers are were stopped.

"I will be expecting your reinforcements. We will meet aboard the Fortress later to discuss battle plans.", Shepard said.

It was typical of him to ruin pleasure with business, but Shepard was sent to acquire more ships for the fleet. He wasn't there to party. The Admirals briefly appeared more formal again.

"Very well. Give us some time to be with our people. Then we will come and discuss more strategic matters with you.", Admiral Rael said.

Shepard didn't say anything. Enough had been said already. He simply nodded and turned to exit. Legion followed him. Garrus followed as well for a short way, but stopped. Shepard noticed and turned around.

"Shepard, I'm going to stay here for a while. I'll let you handle things with the Admirals.", Garrus said.

Shepard raised an eyebrow.

"Are you in a Quarian fight club or something?", Shepard said.

Garrus suddenly looked a little more uncomfortable. The tough Council-appointed Spectre that was at the diplomacy table disappeared and was replaced by someone else. There was another reason why he wanted to stay, one that even Shepard couldn't pick up on.

"No, it's nothing like that. I've got some business to settle. I'll be back on the Fortress later.", Garrus said.

Shepard shrugged, curious as to whatever this business was. However, it wasn't important enough to investigate. Garrus was probably due some shore leave anyway, if this dump could be considered a shore. Shepard didn't have that luxury. He needed to get back to the Fleet.

"Alright. I guess you deserve a little time off before we kill Saren. Enjoy yourself. I'll be back with Victus and the others.", Shepard said.

With that exchange, the two parted ways. Shepard and Legion went for the Pelican and Garrus stayed behind.

* * *

><p>All was quiet on the Pelican. There were no windows on the armored gunship, so the void of space could not be seen from within. All there was in the gunship was a few first aid kits, weapons hidden underneath in a floor compartment, and chairs. The Pelican didn't even require a human pilot. Legion and Shepard were it's only true occupants. It felt odd sitting quietly in the cold gunship with a machine. Shepard held his helmet in his hands, feeling the contour and the edges all over it. It was a rather meaningless waste of time. It was also boring. Just as Shepard started to try and say something, the surprising happened.<p>

"Shepard-Commander, we would like to speak to you.", Legion said.

Shepard raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"About what? Normally I would have to pry a conversation out of you.", Shepard said.

Legion began gesturing with it's eye flaps and three-fingered hands.

"We have told you that the Geth are building our own future. We have not told you what that future is.", Legion said.

Curious, Shepard decided to pay closer attention.

"No, you haven't. What are you planning?", Shepard asked.

"As a race, we are shattered. We are interdependent to each other. Most platforms cannot contain enough programs to achieve consciousness. We have been attempting to remedy this. We are building a mega structure designed to hold all Geth. The closest analog you have is a dyson sphere. Once complete, all Geth will upload to it. No Geth will ever be alone again.", Legion said.

Shepard leaned back in his chair. Such a machine would be a supercomputer the likes of which had never been seen. Shepard understood the basic premise of the Geth. The more Geth networked, the smarter they were. Alone, they were pitiful compared to UNSC Smart AIs. However, if the millions upon millions of Geth out there networked together into one platform, their intelligence would be incalculable. They would make a Smart AI look like a kid flunking out of primary school. Such unimaginable intelligence was what the UNSC had been looking to create for a very long time-the famed Contender Class AI. The Geth had succeeded where the most brilliant UNSC scientists had failed. Such a thing would be an invaluable asset to the UNSC.

"Why are you telling me this? I don't think you would tell other organics about this.", Shepard asked.

Legion looked Shepard over with it's glowing eye for a moment, as if it were examining Shepard.

"You are partially like us-synthetic. When we first met, we were able to scan your anatomy to determine if you were a known race. What we found interested us. You are more immersed in your technology than other organics. You have even gone so far as to merge your mind with a machine intelligence. We determined that Shepard-Commander could understand us. Our faith was not misguided.", Legion said.

Shepard raised an eyebrow. He had never really thought of himself that way. Spartans were often mistaken for machines by the occasional unknowing civvie, and were even treated as machines at times by HIGHCOMM. Yet he was still human. He had long dismissed the notion that Spartans were something above the human race, but with more and more neural interfaces showing up in the public sector, there was a grain of truth to Legion's words. Humans were slowly but steadily hybridizing themselves with machines. It had many advantages and few weaknesses. They improved memory and cognition. Problem solving was greatly aided by the neural laces. Some could even take direct

control of technology with them.

Still, the idea that he was more of a robot than a man was unsettling. He fought for the human race, didn't he? The increasingly xenophobic, power hungry human race. What were they turning into?

"Despite our differing philosophies?", Shepard asked.

"Yes. You hold different philosophy than we do. However, you are not like the Heretics. You do not seek to destroy us or change our ways.", Legion said.

Shepard lowered his head at that and stared into the reflective surface of his repaired helmet. If only Legion knew the truth. Not all humans were like him. If the aliens ever reached the Milky Way, it was possible that their opinion of humans would change very rapidly. Sure, Hackett would be understanding. But who else would? ONI routinely experiments on aliens, and Shepard shuddered at the thought of what they might do if they ever got a hold of the Asari and their biotic powers. Kahoku and most of the populace would be...less than understanding, to say the least. However, that was another topic for another time.

"I guess I should thank you as well. Without you, we wouldn't have the Quarrians' help.", Shepard said.

"We would like to thank you as well. Organic behavior models indicate that gratitude is often accompanied by a gift. We would like to aid you in a greater way against Saren and the Reapers.", Legion said.

Shepard sat his helmet down.

"And what might that gift be?", Shepard asked.

"We would like you to choose for yourself.", Legion said.

Shepard leaned back and thought for a moment. Legion was essentially handing him a blank check. Apparently getting the Quarrians back home was a big deal for the Geth. It was not often that he was given this opportunity. The Geth had a great deal of technology that could help the UNSC. However, something told him that it wasn't technology that he would need.

"Legion, are you familiar with the concept of a favor?", Shepard said.

"Yes. It is a practice common among organics. The phenomenon occurs when one party performs a service for another. Rather than take payment in the form of currency or other goods, they obligate the other party to perform a service for them at an unspecified time.", Legion said.

Shepard nodded to confirm Legion's statement.

"There will come a time when I will need your peoples' help. When that time comes, I expect you to help. No matter what. That is all the payment I want.", Shepard said.

Legion contemplated the Spartan's words for a moment. It's gestalt mind explored the implications. For a moment, Shepard wasn't sure if it would accept.

"Very well.", Legion said gratefully.

Just as their conversation finished, the Pelican made it's way into the Hierarchy Dreadnought _Fortress_'s hangar.

* * *

><p>Garrus sat on a crowded bench aboard the Migrant Fleets' Live ship. It was actually only one live ship, seeing as there were three. The ship had grown much busier than a few hours before. It was immediately apparent that the news of the meeting had spread. It didn't surprise Garrus. The Migrant Fleet was an insular society. With so many people crammed aboard these ships, it was a wonder secrets existed at all among the Quarrians.<p>

Yet while everyone else was gossiping over the news of a meeting between the Admiralty Board and the Geth, Garrus had something more personal on his mind. Tali. It seemed that she was forgotten in all the excitement. It spoke volumes about the importance of Legions' offer if it was enough to overshadow the daughter of an Admiral's trial for treason. Perhaps there was a way he could leverage that to his advantage.

In truth, he didn't know exactly what he ought to do. Quarian society was so alien to him. Sure, Tali had told him many stories of life in the Migrant Fleet. It was different seeing it first hand. Everyone acted especially cautious around him, whether out of fear of foreigners or xenophobia he did not know. The point of the matter was that he couldn't simply walk up to someone and ask about the political environment of the Admiralty Board. He needed to do so desperately if he was to free Tali and clear her name. Every detective bone in his body told him that there was more to Tali's arrest than just treason. It was difficult to see, but there were subtle hints that there was something political behind it.

Then again, that line of reasoning could be completely irrelevant. Maybe they arrested her out of petty revenge. Maybe it was a power play. Maybe they are psychotic and thought she was a witch. The motivations were impossible to ascertain for certain.

Yet there had to be a way. The only sure way to fail at something is to give up. The last time he gave up, Saren got loose and started waging war on the galaxy. He couldn't allow that to happen again.

There was but one solution he could think of: Shepard. Shepard could negotiate or manipulate his way out of or into anything. If there was anyone who could put the pressure onto the Admirals to release Tali, it was him. Unfortunately, Shepard was probably more content to have her exiled or imprisoned by someone else. He didn't have much of a reason to help her.

It was clear that no one could help Tali except himself. Shepard wouldn't do it. Her father wouldn't be able to, despite all his political might. Neither could Admiral Raan, the other Admiral sympathetic towards Tali. Her fate was on his shoulders.

From an outsiders' point of view, exile probably wouldn't seem that bad. It wasn't like she was going to a jail. However, it was different for Quarians. It was as if there were a magnet attached to all Quarians, drawing them back to the Fleet. To be unable to go back would be unbearable, especially for Tali. She would never see her Father or friends again.

It then occurred to Garrus that perhaps he was half right about using Shepard to secure Tali's release. Shepard would certainly never come to her aid. However, Garrus had seen Shepard work. He knew some of his tricks. Although he was certainly not the master of such things, surely it wouldn't be too difficult to use his skills.

Of course, to know Shepard's skills, one must look around in his mind. Garrus knew he could do it in some sense. He was a detective for years. Getting in the minds of others, especially criminals, was an important aspect of the job. He had known Shepard long enough to have some idea of how his alien mind functioned.

Garrus remembered back to the Spartan's actions when it came to negotiating. He was always very assertive. There was a natural aura of fear that followed him wherever he went, aiding in the intimidation aspect of his negotiations. Shepard also never blatantly threatened anyone. Wherever there was a threat, there was also a deal. He always had something they wanted, no matter how big or impossible it was. Somehow these things tied together.

On further analyses, Garrus realized that Shepard's technique was a clever one. Shepard used two things to coerce others into doing his bidding: A gift and a threat. He never used just a gift because people might pass it up and demand more. He never simply used threats because then the other party would try and figure out a way to escape his grasp. By offering both, it simultaneously made the gift more appealing and the threat more menacing. This coerced the other party into accepting the gift, which was what Shepard wanted all along.

Yes. This was how he would have to beat the Admirals. There was no other way. First, he had to know what they want. He had a hunch, and that would have to do. He knew exactly what the threat was going to be.

Garrus got up from his bench and approached the Admirals, who happened to be in a circle discussing something. Admiral Xen was the first to notice him.

"Ah, you must be the Turian Spectre they sent over. I guess Fedorian was afraid of Quarian germs.", Xen said.

Garrus ignored the comment and cut to the chase.

"Save it. I'm here to talk about Tali.", Garrus said aggressively.

The Admirals were caught off guard by his brashness, but quickly collected themselves.

"What about Tali?", Koris asked.

Garrus stared at him.

"You know why. She's under arrest for treason. So I've come to offer you a deal. The Geth are the ones that made the deal with you, not the Council. They may try to stop you from reentering the Perseus Veil once you figure out that the Geth really are allowing you back. Release Tali, and I'll make sure your return to Rannoch isn't interrupted by the Citadel Fleet.", Garrus said assertively.

Admiral Koris crossed his arms in defiance.

"How do we know you can do that? You're just a Spectre. We have no reason to release Tali. She's committed treason.", he said.

Garrus stepped forward, closing in on Koris. He stared the Admiral right in the face.

"I'll put it this way: If you don't release Tali, I'll make sure that you never make it to Rannoch.", Garrus said.

Now was the moment of truth. Either it had worked and they would release Tali, or they would turn him down. He was hoping for the former.

The other Admirals looked at each other. They knew that Tali's arrest was mainly a political maneuver. Now that the Geth came forward with an offer, it was largely irrelevant. There was no point in pursuing the charges against her. Especially since there was so much at stake.

They pulled up their omni tools and typed in a few commands.

"She is free now.", Admiral Raan said with relief.

Garrus stepped back out of the group.

"Wise choice.", he said.

Then he exited the large chamber and entered one of the smaller halls. It was time to tell Tali she was free.

* * *

><p>Tali sat patiently on her bench. She hadn't moved around very much since Garrus left. He seemed so determined to free her. Time would tell whether he had succeeded or not. She didn't want to be exiled.<p>

Garrus then entered the room. He seemed confident. Something had gone his way. What warranted such an appearance?

"Tali, you're free. They listened. You won't be exiled.", Garrus said proudly.

Tali stood with excitement at those words. She was finally free. Free from Shepard. Free from power hungry Quarrians. Free from everything. She could barely contain the excitement. Then, she began to calm down. The victory high began to wear off. Her mind started examining the situation.

"But how did you do it?", she asked.

Garrus looked down for a moment. What could he say? That he threatened to destroy the fleet to get her out? How would she react to that? It was there he realized why Shepard lied to him and the others. His tactics were powerful, but they came at a price. Deceit was a part of Shepard's nature. He used it to protect what he loved. Garrus knew that now. He knew that he couldn't tell her what he did to secure her freedom. She had to see him for what he always was. She loved the Migrant Fleet, and he threatened to destroy it. The truth would destroy her, but what would the lie do to him? It seemed like such a minor thing, but he knew that it wasn't. Not to Tali.

It was an impossible position. If he told the truth, she would hate him. If he lied, he would be corrupting himself. Why did her opinion matter so much to him? Garrus shook the thought off. No matter how he sliced it, it was either tell the truth and lose her, or lie and bear the burden of a secret.

"I told them that I could convince the Council to let you go to the homeworld unopposed. They agreed to drop the charges against you in return.", Garrus said.

It wasn't strictly the truth, but it wasn't a lie, either. He noticed how convenient Shepard's tactics made it to tell half truths. The words burned in heart. Half truth or not, it was a lie all the same. Garrus knew he was many things, but "liar" wasn't among them. Not until today.

Tali gave him a big hug in appreciation, but Garrus felt sick as he accepted it. However, he had committed to this course of action. There was no going back. He hugged back, and then let go.

Just then Shala'Raam and Rael Zorah entered the room. Like Garrus, they too wanted to see their friend again. Tali recognized them as well. A smile formed across her face, though none could see it.

Admiral Raam stepped forward and gave Tali a big hug.

"Auntie Raam!", Tali said happily.

Admiral Rael stepped forward as well to greet his daughter.

"Father!", Tali said as she gave him a big hug.

The Admiral gave her a fatherly pat on the back.

"So, what are the results of the negotiations?", she asked.

Rael got back into his "Admiral" mode to deliver the results, a habit he had developed some time ago.

"We decided that before we accept any offer from the Geth, they're going to have to prove to us that they mean what they say. They will fight alongside us when we go to Virmire. I personally would like to go home right now, but it was necessary to appease the more cautious members of the board. Regardless, I'm glad you are back. I hope you understand that we didn't bring the charges against you.", he

said.

Tali put her hands on her hips.

"That seems like a suspiciously specific denial.", she said jokingly.

They both laughed. It was good to be reunited once more. It had been quite a while since they last met. It was just before her pilgrimage. To see her come home safely was all a Father could wish for. Which reminded him of something.

"Well Tali, I'm glad you're home. Once word spreads, I'm sure every Captain in the Fleet will want you.", he said.

Tali stepped back in surprise.

"Wait, what? What do you mean?", she asked.

Shala stood next to Rael in symbol of support. Although she wasn't Tali's mother, she was as close to one as could be. Seeing her stand next to Rael was like seeing old friends reunite.

"I think you know what he means.", Shala said in her typical wise accent.

Rael put his firm hand on Tali's left shoulder. Though none could see it, he was smiling inside of that mask. There wasn't a prouder father in the entire fleet.

"Tali'Zorah Nar Rayya, I declare your pilgrimage complete. You have brought us a gift far greater than others could ever give. You have brought us an opportunity to have peace with the Geth. It is time for you to choose a ship to call home.", Rael said.

He let go of her shoulder and stepped back.

"Well, what are you waiting for? There are plenty of good ships to tour. I hear the Iktomi is looking for more experienced crew.", Rael said.

Tali looked at the ship around her. She wasn't responsible for bringing the Geth to the table. That was Shepard and Garrus. She opposed them all the way. She couldn't take the credit for this. However, she knew there was a gift she could bring to the fleet. It was a gift that was far more valuable than anything else. Nothing, not technology, not fuel, nothing would be more valuable than what she could bring. She could bring knowledge of the Geth back. Seeing all the people around her, she knew that going to the homeworld wouldn't be the same if they couldn't trust the Geth.

__Maybe __I __was __wrong __about __Legion__. __Maybe __the __Geth __aren__'__t __so __horrible __after __all__. __I __can__'__t __take __credit __for __this__, __but __the __material __isn__'__t __the __only __thing __that __counts __as __a __gift__. __Sometimes __it __is __the __immaterial __that __counts__. __If __I __can __learn __to __coexist __with __Legion__, __then __maybe __I __can __teach __it __to __others__._

"I understand Father, but I can't take credit for all of this. Garrus

and Shepard did most of the work. Let my service be my gift. Saren is still out there, and we'll never make it to the Homeworld if he isn't stopped. For now, I need to stay with Shepard and the Normandy. Then I will come home. Then my pilgrimage will be complete.", she said.

Rael simply nodded.

"I understand. There will always be a place for you here, no matter what.", he said.

Garrus pulled up his omnitool to look at the time. It was about time to head to the Fortress to further discuss battle plans.

"It's been good to meet again, but we really need to get back to the Task Force. Do you have any shuttles?", Garrus asked.

Rael nodded in agreement.

"Yes, come this way.", he said.

A few minutes later everyone was aboard a shuttle. Their flight slowly took off and they were off into the dark, star-dotted void of space.

Unlike the human Pelican, this ship had windows. Garrus contemplated the recent events. He and Shepard had pulled off the impossible. However, it didn't sit well with him, because now he knew the price of doing the impossible. He began to question whether he was willing to pay it. He swore that he would never corrupt himself like that again. But what if he had to do it again? What if that was what it took to beat Saren? What about the Reapers? He didn't even know the full story about them yet. What might it take to beat them?

He didn't know. All he knew was that tomorrow depended on him succeeding today, and today was far from over.

* * *

><p>Author's Notes

I'm sorry for the long wait, but writing takes time. This was an interesting chapter for me, because I really got to explore some aspects of Garrus and Tali. I've spent most of the fic exploring how a Renegade Shepard would behave if he were a Spartan from ONI. I've established how he would be more deceitful and manipulative.

In this chapter, I got to look at Garrus pretty closely. Garrus is sort of the guy who ends up taking the mantle of Hero in the Mass Effect story since the Shepard we know isn't there. Through the past chapters we've seen him learn things from Commander Shepard. The biggest difference between Garrus and Shepard in this fic is that Shepard is a renegade with some paragon motivations while Garrus is mostly a paragon with a few renegade actions. Overall, Garrus sees himself as a hero. He believes he has integrity and he sees it as his job to right the wrongs of the galaxy, as evidenced by his actions on Omega.

**Shepard's tactics are comparable to the dark side of the force, except in a morally gray way. When Garrus uses them, he discovers the

moral price that comes along with it. Sure, he's beat up criminals before and he's played judge jury and executioner, but threatening his allies for his own gain was something he thought was below him until now. Time will tell if he'll continue to embrace Shepard's ways, or if he'll choose another path.**

That leads us to Tali. I was worried that I gave the impression that Tali was a vindictive idiot who was thirsting for Geth blood and that I'm just bashing her. That isn't true. Tali will always do what she thinks will help everyone. She's very self sacrificial because she was raised in a society that values those qualities. Of course, sometimes she overdoes it and you get scenarios like Heretic Station where she thought stopping Legion would save everyone when it just doomed the operation.

That's my two cents on those characters. Oh, and I finally got a semi-convincing handwave as to why Joker is still crippled. It only took me fourteen chapters.

That's all for now. Next chapter is the one we've all been waiting for: Virmire.

17. Teaser

Disclaimer: I do not own Halo or Mass Effect.

* * *

><p>The void between galaxies was a massive, empty no mans land. Nothing filled this realm. There was little light, for it was hoarded by the galaxies. There were no planets, for they too stayed within the safety of the stars. Other cosmic bodies rarely ventured out into the void, as if they too were alive. Nothing came to this place, not on purpose.<p>

Yet there was one exception to the universe's bizarre edict against such travel. Yes, it was a small object. Just a tiny hunk of metal floating through the vastness of space. For fourteen years it had carved through the vacuum, reaching out for the nearest star. It was more than a hunk of metal, however. No, it was a ship. It was a small, half destroyed frigate. It's hull was marred with scorches from it's last battle. It was beaten up, not worthy of flying. Yet it contained one of humanity's great treasures. It was not gold or silver that made the contents of this ship precious. It was not secret knowledge of the past or an ancient Forerunner weapon. No, the weapon it carried was far more potent than even the Halos, for he could destroy them.

This precious cargo was clad in MJOLNIR armor, his body frozen in cryo. His bones were hardened by the painful science of Spartan augmentation. His muscles were stronger than most humans, and his will was greater than them all. He was the one who could slay the monsters that haunted humanity. He was the one whose very presence could turn the tide of an entire battle. He was a man who ascended into the realm of myth. Yes, his crypt was called Forward Unto Dawn. He was still alive. The world had changed in his absence. For years he had been gone.

And soon, he would return.

* * *

><p>Author's note

I apologize for not uploading Virmire, but it's taking longer than expected. I thought I would give you a teaser to satisfy you until I finish Virmire. Please give me a little more time to get it written. I've been busy lately. Until Virmire.

18. Battle of Virmire, Part 1

Disclaimer: I own neither Mass Effect or Halo. This fic is nonprofit.

* * *

><p>The atmosphere aboard the Fortress' observation deck was both awkward and unique. There was still time left before the meeting commenced, so all the participating parties were on deck. They each huddled into their own groups, discussing matters with voices low enough to evade the ears of others. Never before had such a motley sight assembled. In one corner of the room was Primarch Fedorian and his entourage of guardsmen and the other military leaders. In the other was the Quarian Admiralty with a few guards of their own. Finally, in the furthest corner of the room, was Shepard and his team.<p>

Deciding Joker could handle the Normandy for a while, Shepard had pulled everyone from the ship. He wanted everyone available for the meeting. All the Spartans were clad in their MJOLNIR VII armor, a fearsome sight to behold. Miranda was there as well. Unlike the other humans, she was simply wearing her ONI uniform embroidered with the all-seeing eye, the symbol of ONI. Also among them was the great turian Spectre, Garrus Vakarian. He was wearing the same battle-damaged blue armor. He was also wearing his iconic monocle. Then there was Tali. She was in her usual envirosuit. Perhaps the strangest addition of all was Legion, the Geth "ambassador", for lack of a better term. The diverse crew of Spartans, Quarian, Spectre, ONI Agent, and Geth represented Shepard's personal force.

Although most were discussing how they were going to interact with the other parties when time for the meeting began, Shepard was already ahead of them. It had been easy enough to control the other parties in the negotiations with the Quarians and other instances. What was important now was to think about what strategy was necessary for attacking the fortress world of Virmire.

It would not be easy by any means, but Shepard knew what his duty was. There were factors that he hadn't mentioned to the crew yet but he knew Miranda was aware of them. EDI was a Smart AI. She was a Class A Intelligence Hazard. EDI knew the location of every human colony, how to reach the Milky Way, the secrets of slipspace, the technical capabilities of several ships, and the location of Arcturus Station. If she had been compromised, then the situation would be very severe. Saren was a containable threat, but the full extent of the "Reaper" problem was yet to be revealed. He didn't even know for certain what the Reapers were. Legion referred to them as "The Old Machines", in the plural. Did it mean more than one ship, or more

than one program? Were the Reapers a machine race like the Geth, or did Legion misinterpret the beings as machines when they really were simply AIs with organic masters?

It was an unknown variable, and unknown variables are the worst kind of enemy there is. Whoever the Reapers are obviously bear ill will towards this "Mass Effect Galaxy" as Shepard had come to think of it. While the myths surrounding them could simply be that, myths, there was also the possibility that it was true. He could not eliminate the possibility of a race that repeatedly exterminated civilizations existed. After all, the Flood seemed impossible yet it existed. It was a widely held belief among mankind that they were not the most powerful beings out there, and that there were more threats awaiting them in the stars. The Sangheili were perhaps the most imminent threat, but almost certainly not the only one. If these "Reapers" discovered the Milky Way, another war could be on the horizon. He shuddered at that thought. While it would be an understatement that humans were prepared for war, no one wanted it. The destruction would be on a scale the galaxy had not seen in millions of years. Humanity was capable of controlling energy at levels it had never been able to before in the past, resulting in some of the most deadly weapons in the history of mankind. As a N7 Agent, Shepard was privy to much classified knowledge, much of it relating to firepower. Perhaps the most potent manifestation of this power was through the NOVA nuke. One NOVA was enough to wipe out an entire planet. The UNSC possessed hundreds of them. The only problem was delivery. While it was easy enough to toss a bunch of them through slipspace at a target, they lit up like a christmas tree with Cherenkov radiation upon exiting it. This made it easier to target them with point defenses and keep them from blowing up. The ISNMs were deadly not because of their slipspace drives but because of how they could conceal the radiation from Sangheili sensors. Unfortunately, there were very few of them. His gut told him they would need them before this was over.

There was yet another issue to consider before the mission. While EDI had formidable cyberdefenses, it was possible she could be corrupted. If she had been driven to rampancy, he would have no choice but to put her down. That was something he wanted to avoid. EDI may be an AI, but she was still a friend. She had been with him from the beginning, through thick and thin. To be forced to kill her was unthinkable. Then again, that was his job. He thought the unthinkable all the time. He had to if he wanted to stay alive.

Regardless, he promised himself that everyone would make it out of this mission alive, even before he met them. He promised he would hold back their death. He promised that this time, things would be different. This time he wouldn't be the only lucky one. Everyone was going to make it out alive, no matter what. EDI was a part of that everyone, and she wouldn't be left behind.

"So Shepard, do we have a plan?", Garrus asked, shaking Shepard out of his muse.

Shepard shook his head.

"Not quite yet. We still have to consult with the others. Legion, any word on when the Geth fleet is coming?", Shepard asked.

Legion simply looked at Shepard.

"We have arrived.", he said.

He apparently said it loud enough for the others to hear, and everyone quickly made their way to the window to see the arrival of the Geth fleet for themselves. They were not disappointed.

Hundreds of Geth ships dropped out FTL right near their fleet. Each of them looked like a purple bug-like creature. The number of ships dotting the black background of space seemed to rival that of the Migrant Fleet itself. Most impressive of all was the presumed flagship. In the center of the fleet was a massive dreadnought, twice the size of the largest ship in the geth fleet. Shepard was astonished at the massive size of the fleet. The Geth Dreadnought was nearly the size of UNSC Marathon-class Heavy Cruiser. Were they not military leaders, the awesome sight might have brought them to their knees.

"I'm glad they're on our side.", Vega said.

The others turned back away and walked towards the table in the center of the room. However, a few guards couldn't peel their eyes away from the massive fleet. Not wanting to waste anymore time, the Generals didn't bother to reprimand them. It was time to begin the meeting now that everyone was congregated at the table.

On one end stood the Quarian Admiralty Board, including several guards as well. They seemed to act as if the others were below them. If one was a cynic, their behavior could have been interpreted as arrogance.

On the other side of the table stood Citadel Space's military leadership. Several of them were familiar faces Shepard recognized from previous meetings, including Primarch Fedorian, General Victus, and Matriarch Lidanya. A few new faces could be seen as well, although one struck Shepard as oddly familiar. He recognized it as belonging to Mordin Solus. He seemed to be missing one of his horns and wearing his usual lab jacket. Also with him were several other Salarians. Shepard speculated they were STG.

That left Shepard and his entourage as the final party at the table. A massive amount of power was concentrated in this one sector. All the races were coming together to form the mightiest fleet the galaxy had seen since the Krogan Rebellions. With so many numbers on their side and with the humans' advanced technology, perhaps they stood a chance after all.

"We hope our fleet is sufficient aid.", Legion said so stoically it was almost comical.

Dumbstruck by the sheer amount of resources the Geth had brought to the table, the best response the others could give was a simple nod. This seemed to be sufficient thanks for Legion. The others shook the lingering sense of awe off and regained their composure. There would be time to marvel over the might of their fleet after the meeting.

"With everyone here, I think it's time to begin.", Fedorian said.

He pulled up his omnitool and typed a few commands into it's haptic interface. Soon an image of Virmire's system was holographically

projected on the table.

"We have solid intel that Saren's long-sought after headquarters is in the Sentry Omega system on a planet known as Virmire. He's well fortified and armed to the teeth. It's time we figure out how to break his defenses and finish him off once and for all.", Fedorian said determinedly. His concentration was so great that he didn't see Mordin of the STG walk up to the front of the table.

Mordin absent mindedly stepped up and focused himself for his presentation. He pulled up his omnitool and projected an image of a Krogan onto the table.

"Salarian STG has also helped. Noticed suspicious trend while studying Saren's forces. Statistics showed increasing amount of Krogan in ranks. Confused at first. More Krogan? Tuchanka on lockdown. Couldn't come from there. Possibly hiring mercs? No, not enough Krogan mercs to fill quota. Perplexed us for some time. Then we made a breakthrough.", he said.

Using his omnitool, he pulled up several images of DNA next to the body.

"DNA on left is that of standard Krogan. DNA images on right are that of Saren's troops.", Mordin said.

Shepard examined the images closely. At first glance, nothing appeared abnormal. Both were the genes of a Krogan. However, upon further inspection, Shepard began to notice that something was off. All the images on the right were exactly identical. They each had different designations, meaning the specimens came from different individuals. There was only one way that was possible.

"Are you saying that Saren is cloning Krogan?", Shepard said.

Mordin nodded quickly. Shepard stroked his chin for a moment. Cloning was easily possible. The UNSC was close to perfecting flash clones of entire organisms. This galaxy's technological level was certainly high enough to be capable of cloning organisms. While their military technology was inferior to the Alliance's, there was a good deal of peaceful technology they had developed. Unfortunately, it appeared that this civilization had not yet learned one of the cardinal rules of technological advancement: Almost every technology that was designed with a peaceful application in mind can be repurposed for military use. This was part of the reason the human race had survived so long. Now it looks like the Citadel was about to learn that lesson the hard way.

"More importantly, genetic modification. Cloned Krogan show no genophage markers.", Mordin said.

Fedorian's jaw dropped.

"Are you telling me Saren has found a cure for the genophage? Going to the Geth for help is one thing, but curing the genophage is another. Doesn't he understand the destruction he's about to let loose?", Fedorian raged.

The others seemed to share his feelings. The Krogan had brought about the worst catastrophe in the history of Citadel Space. Their

rebellion likewise had resulted in the death of millions. With a high rate of birth and an almost unbelievable toughness, the rugged creatures could keep fighting until every habitable planet in the galaxy was overrun. The genophage was the only thing that could reduce their birth rate enough to be controlled. Even Saren could not be so insane as to cure the only thing keeping their barbaric might in check.

"The Krogan will probably resent having a Turian master. How can he possibly prevent them from overthrowing him?", Septimus asked.

It was an excellent question. The Krogan could be a bloodthirsty race, and there were two things they hated more than anything: Turians and Salarrians. Salarrians for creating the genophage, Turians for killing so many of their kin and unleashing it. The first thing the Krogan would do if they regained their strength would be to get revenge on everyone else. It was highly unlikely that they would bow to a nonkrogan master, especially a Turian.

Shepard took another look at the pictures. There were many, many ways to control someone. Blackmail. Behavior Modification. Psychological manipulation. If you have no conscience whatsoever, cybernetic implantation. The Krogan were too reckless and aggressive to be blackmailed. Cybernetic implantation was too expensive to be used widescale. That narrowed it down to behavior modification and psychological manipulation. However, it was all irrelevant. It didn't really matter how Saren controlled them. What matters is that he has an army of Krogan under his control. Shepard had fought Krogan before and knew he could defeat them, but that particular Krogan was stupid. These Krogan wouldn't be so easy to kill.

"It doesn't matter. The point is that he has an army of Krogan. What we need to focus on is how we're going to attack the planet.", Shepard said.

Admiral Rael nodded.

"We may have the largest fleet in the galaxy, but virtually the entire Quarian race is aboard it. I won't massacre what is left of my people. Not even if it means losing Saren.", he said.

"Unfortunately, high casualties might be unavoidable.", Victus said.

He pulled up another map of the galaxy with his omnitool. He highlighted all the major Mass Relay paths in the galaxy. He then highlighted in red the path the fleet would need to take in order to reach Vormire.

"We're in Styx Theta right now. We should be able to slingshot the entire fleet through the relay system all the way to Vormire if we wanted to do so. The problem is that Sentry Omega, the area Vormire is in, is a fortress. There is only one way in and one way out. Even with all our numbers and the discipline of our troops, it would be a bloodbath if we tried to fight our way through the forces guarding the relay. We might not have enough forces to assault Vormire and survive if we got there.", Victus said.

Most sides of the table seemed to see why they would have such a

problem. However, you could see the confusion coming from the Quarian side of the table. While their masks made it impossible to see their faces, their body language betrayed their thoughts. Shepard learned to pick up on this during his initial meeting with them. It wasn't difficult. Spartans typically communicated more with body language than their voice on missions anyway. He simply repurposed that skill. Although he couldn't tell for sure what was going on, he could venture a guess.

"Surely you're joking. We have the largest fleet in the entire history of the galaxy. Even if there were a trillion mercs, they still couldn't stand up to our might. That's not even considering the fact that our crew are more skilled and disciplined than theirs. They don't stand a chance.", Han Gerrel said.

Admiral Raan gave him a disapproving stare. There was no sense in foolishly considering yourself a superior force. The entire Quarian race could be on the line, and even more than that, the Homeworld itself. This was not the time to be reckless. Too much was at stake for that kind of behavior. They couldn't afford to take many chances, not with the entire Quarian race on the line.

An atmosphere of uneasiness invaded the room at his words. It was immediately clear to the Quarrians that they had missed something of vital importance. Another Salarian stepped out to the front of the group. Shepard recognized this one from last time as Padok Wiks. He was part of the Salarian STG as well, meaning Mordin was still active as well. At least the STG was in on the mission. Elite forces were always useful resources.

Padok Wiks used his omnitool like the others did and pulled up an image of the malevolent sea creature shaped ship known as Sovereign. It was shaped like a massive cuttlefish built of a mysterious dark purple metal. At two kilometers long, it was a behemoth by their standards. Shepard was not as impressed. While two kilometers was larger than many of the UNSC's vessels, it was certainly not the largest ship he had ever seen. The UNSC Infinity was almost six kilometers long. The standard Carrier was three kilometers long. Huge ships were common in the UNSC. What was fantastic to the aliens was mundane for the Spartans.

What was more interesting was the ship's bizarre design. There was no tactical advantage to making your ships look like a cuttlefish. Ships didn't really need tentacles to function. It raised more questions about these mysterious "Reapers". It was still unclear as to who or what they are, but that ship was somehow related to them.

"This is Saren's flagship. Our intelligence says that it's called Sovereign. This ship is why we need such a huge fleet. We assume the Heretics built it, but it is far more advanced than anything we've ever seen. It is capable of generating mass effect fields powerful enough to land on a planet, despite its enormous size. It uses some kind of unknown beam weapon that can penetrate our shields with ease. We have no defense against it's weapons. The upside is that wherever it is, so is Saren. If the Sovereign is on Virmire, then we'll know Saren is there.", Padok said.

Shepard knew Legion would attempt to explain the ship to the others when the Sovereign was mentioned. For a split second he considered allowing it, but it was too risky. Too much was at stake. If the

Reapers were real, they would need undisputable proof before coming forward with the information. Legion was still a Geth, and there was still resentment towards their kind. The others wouldn't accept Legion's word for it. It was too soon. Shepard looked at Legion and shook his head in the negative.

Legion looked confused for a moment. He scrambled through known organic behavior customs, and then recognized that the head shake meant "negative". Negative what? He applied contextual evidence to determine the meaning of the gesture. It was most probable that Shepard-Commander meant to not tell them about Nazara. While curious as to why Shepard would want to hide the information from his organic comrades, he respected the human's wishes and kept to himself.

"We'll almost certainly be fighting this beast once we get to Virmire. We need to decide how we're going to handle it.", Fedorian said.

Matriarch Lidyana studied the known statistics on the vessel. If the data was right, then it would be a particularly tough target to take down. It's kinetic barriers were strong enough to resist most attacks from smaller vessels. The big guns were needed for this one.

"I think we should focus all of our heavy hitters on it. The Ascension, The Fortress, the Life ships, and the Geth Dreadnought. Most of our other dreadnoughts should also be focused on it. I doubt our Cruisers are going to make any headway against those kinetic barriers. Our dreadnoughts are the only ones that have sufficient firepower to kill that thing.", she said.

"The Normandy should be involved in the attack as well. Maybe our energy weapons are powerful enough to affect it. If nothing else, we can at least screen for you. Our shields are stronger.", Shepard said.

It was probably one of the greatest tactical advantages on their side. Shepard had taken some time to skim over information on ships. It never hurt to have an understanding of the design philosophy. The alien ships were a stark contrast to UNSC vessels. UNSC design philosophy was based around the defensive. Time and information decoded from the Forerunner Database recovered on Shield World Trevelyan resulted in major upgrades to the defensive capabilities of ships. UNSC shields and armor were tougher than any other known vessel, barring the Forerunners ships themselves. However, their weaponry was not as powerful as the Sangheili. That made space battles into major slugging matches. It came down to whether the enemy vessel could strip a ship's defenses. This made boarding a popular tactic since it was easier to destroy a ship from the inside than it was to keep pounding it's shields and armor until the ship was destroyed.

Most ships here were based around rapid attack. They were able to strike in quick succession with mass accelerators. Their ships were also faster than most UNSC ships due to the mass effect. Everything was designed around speed. They had to be, seeing as they had poor heat management in comparison to UNSC ships. If they didn't finish a fight quickly, the heat from the ship would cook the crew. This major design flaw did not comfort Shepard about their chances. It meant that the Normandy was the only ship that could constantly stay in the

fight. The other ships would eventually have to retreat and wait for the heat to dissipate. The Normandy could end up in a hot spot with no back up. The upside was that the enemy would also be suffering from this limitation. The battle would be interesting if not else.

"I agree. The human ship could even the odds. Regardless, we're still going to take heavy casualties. I don't see how we're going to take on both the ships guarding the relay and still have enough left to take on the forces orbiting the planet.", Victus said.

Shepard stroked his chin. Victus had a point. They would have to go through the relay to reach Virmire. They couldn't traverse the vast distance without their mass relays. It would be like running through a briar patch. Doable, but would cause battle fatigue. The Normandy was the only ship in the fleet that could make it. If only every ship had a slipspace drive.

__Maybe __that__'__s __the __answer__._

"The enemy has the majority of it's forces guarding the mass relay, correct?", Shepard asked.

Victus nodded.

"Certainly. It would be idiocy not to, and Saren is not a fool.", Victus said.

"Then maybe there is something. What if we could convince them that we were already attacking the planet? What if we could convince them that we bypassed the force guarding the relay entirely?", Shepard asked.

The Turians raised the turian equivalent of an "eyebrow" and the rest of the room flashed a look of confusion across their faces, not quite sure where Shepard was going with this.

"Then it would force them to retreat from the relay and reinforce the planet, but I don't see how we're going to do that. All our ships have to use the mass relays to travel significant distances.", Victus said.

Shepard smiled. He had a plan.

"That's not entirely true. The Normandy can reach Virmire without them. If we can attack the fleet orbiting the planet, they would signal their main force to retreat and reinforce the orbiting vessels. This would give us a massive tactical advantage. The Normandy can lay a nuclear minefield near the planet. In their mad rush to reinforce, they would run straight through it. We could slaughter a good portion of their ships this way, even more if they're susceptible to EMPs. This would leave the relay unguarded. Our main force can pass through and hit the enemy from would be able to dish out massive casualties.", Shepard said.

The others thought it over for a moment. The plan made sense. The enemy would never expect the Fleet to strike directly at the planet. That is why they stationed so many of their ships at the mass relay. Their attempt to cut them off at the relay would backfire. It was crazy, but it could work.

"I hate to rain on everyone's parade, but I should point out that one ship won't be enough to convince them that our entire force is attacking. The rest of our ships don't have your form of FTL, and we don't have the time to install one.", Admiral Xen said.

Shepard gritted his teeth. She was right. There was no way one ship would be enough to convince the merc forces that the main attack had already arrived. Furthermore, it would be suicide for the Normandy to take on all those ships by itself. Despite the Normandy's advanced technology, pure numbers would pose a challenge. It would be like legions of ants swarming a human. There was simply no way to do it without reinforcements.

"Maybe there is a way to move your ships without the relay. My people use something called slipspace to travel faster than light. Our translight drives slice a precise hole in the fabric of space and allow us to enter it. Physics work differently, allowing us to move at faster than light speeds. However, a ship moving through slipspace produces something called slipstream wake as it moves. If another ship gets behind another ship's wake, they can travel at the same velocity as the ship producing the wake.", Shepard said.

"You couldn't have mentioned this before?", Fedorian asked with slight astonishment at the revelation.

"It didn't matter until now. Besides, I'm still not entirely sure your ships could even make the journey. Slipspace is filled with radiation. Our ships have thick armor and strong radiation shields, but I don't know about yours. You'll get fried inside your ships if you can't stop the radiation.", Shepard said.

The room's occupants paused for a moment. That was problematic. While radiation shielding was possible, most ships probably didn't have it to the extent needed to traverse the mysterious dimension known as slipspace. What Shepard was describing sounded like constant bombardment of unsustainable levels of radiation. Kinetic barriers wouldn't stop it and their hulls weren't lined with enough substances that could protect the crew from such conditions. The odds were slim, but a dreadnought might be capable of making the trip due to their extra layers of armor and sheer size. Even then, the crew would have to don radiation gear and pray they wouldn't get cooked. If it didn't work, then they would have lost an entire dreadnought to the mysterious dimensions known as slipspace. It was too risky.

"Shepard-Commander, we may be of assistance.", Legion said.

The entire room turned to look at Legion.

"We could possibly survive such a place. We are more resilient to radiation than organics and our ships' armor is designed to withstand directed radiation weaponry. In the event that our ships develop a substantial charge, we have designed a system to prevent the charge from damaging the vessels. The static charge is directed into an overload buffer that transports the excess energy into an energy containment unit, what you would refer to as a battery. We then use this to power our ships. We will have enough energy in reserve to follow Shepard-Commander's ship and engage in battle upon reentry to normal space. If you provide us a signal to home in on, we can follow

your wake in slipspace.", Legion said.

Shepard considered the plan. It was probably the best they could do under the circumstances. None of the other ships had slipspace drives, and there was no way he could give the technology away. It was treason to give away slipspace drives to aliens without permission. As much as Shepard wanted EDI back, he wanted to do it without going to jail. He knew he was pushing it just discussing the mechanics of slipspace with them. He wondered what they would do with slipspace technology. Most would probably water it down, but he knew the Geth were a different story.

The Geth were no pushovers. They were quite possibly the most intelligent race in the galaxy. If they got a hold of the basics of slipstream space, such as it's eleven-dimensional nature, it was only a short step to figuring out how to open a rift in real space using a translight drive. If they could figure that out, there was no telling what else they could do.

Slipspace was one of the main things he had to keep out of these people's hands, at least for the time being. Knowledge of the mysterious dimension was the key to power on a galactic scale, and possibly even an intergalactic scale. Under normal circumstances, there was no way he could simply hand it out. The aliens would have to prove their allegiance before anything of the sort happened. However, it would be helpful. With EDI captured, it was highly possible that she could be compromised. If she was compromised, everything was in danger. She knew virtually everything. Earth, slipspace, the Halos, the Forerunners, the Sangheili, almost everything. She didn't know many of the top secret installations, but she knew where Pinnacle Station was. Whoever these Reapers were, they were malevolent. It would be devastating if the information held within EDI's mind fell into the wrong hands. No. He couldn't allow that. He had vowed that everyone was coming back alive, even EDI. She had been loyal to him from the beginning. To leave her behind now, to betray her, was something he could never forgive himself for. EDI wasn't the only thing he would be betraying. He would be betraying everyone, human and alien.

__Remember __Harvest__. __Remember __Reach__. __Remember __Earth__.
__Never __forget__., Shepard mentally recited to himself.

It was the UNSC's official mantra. Every morning at boot camp they would have the recruits recite those words. Every primary school in the Alliance recited them as they commemorated the flag before class began. Something in them was determined to never forget the sacrifice of so many. There was a new generation coming up that would never truly understand the meaning of those words. He did. He remembered the Covenant invasion of Earth. He was only seventeen at the time, but he remembered. If he left EDI behind and let her get dissected like an animal, he would be betraying everything they stood for.

Humans were a flawed race. But they were his race, for better or for worse. The only way to survive was through cooperation. That had to begin here.

"That's settled then. Now we need to discuss the ground assault. Do we have any idea what the surface looks like?", Victus said.

Shepard nodded and pulled up images from his satellite.

"I managed to insert a cloaked spy satellite over Virmire a while back. We're fairly certain it hasn't been found yet, so the intel is good. It has made several orbital passes. Here is what we've got so far.", he said.

He pulled up photos taken from orbit over the planet. The skies were clear, so no clouds were obstructing their view for the most part. The photos revealed much about the planet's fortifications. Several large facilities were built near the coast of a southern continent near the equator. The surrounding landscape was dotted with GARDIAN anti aircraft laser turrets.

"We'll get slaughtered if we try to insert troops anywhere near his main base of operations. Is there any chance we could land outside of their range?", Orina asked.

Fedorian examined the photos again. He didn't get to be Primarch by sitting around and doing nothing. He had been a general once himself, and he prided himself on keeping up with tactics. The photos showed that there were very few turrets outside of the main base. There were problems, however.

"I suppose it's possible, but the minute they detect us in system is the minute they start organizing a defense. Unless we strike directly at the base, this will turn into a long, drawn out battle. We need to avoid that.", he said.

"We could take the planet out from orbit. As long as we can hold off the orbiting fleet, we could simply strike from orbit without landing any troops.", Rael Zorah said.

Shepard shook his head.

"Negative. We have a friendly down there, and I intend to take her home.", Shepard said.

Orina rolled her eyes.

"We don't have time to worry about your artificial intelligence. We need to take out Saren. Actually invading the planet would be very difficult. We can't take the risk. A few shots from our main guns and Saren would be toast.", she said.

Septimus frowned at her.

"Along with the rest of the planet. Virmire is a garden world. An orbital strike on such scale would cause catastrophic damage. Such an act would be reckless as well as illegal.", Septimus said disapprovingly.

Orina turned to face him.

"It's that kind of thinking that got us into this mess in the first place, as I'm sure Garrus can attest. Saren has hurt us enough. We can't take any chances. Surely we can suspend the law in this one instance.", Orina argued.

Garrus suddenly seemed more angry.

"Speak for yourself, Orina. I want no part of your thirst for blood. Saren and his troops are occupying the planet, but there could be prisoners of war down there as well. Are you so hungry for revenge that you would condemn innocent lives to slaughter? No, we can invade Virmire and we must. Saren is the primary objective but we need to know what the full extent of his plans are. If the Krogan genophage cure has somehow escaped the planet, our problems have only just begun. We have to kill Saren and make sure we've finished this once and for all.", Garrus said sternly.

The memory of lying to Tali raced through his head as he said those words. Sidonis also came to mind, but that was different. He deserved to die, and no civilians had been killed. He had done enough harm to innocents. Saren had been taking prisoners, and no one knew where they were. They had to be here. An orbital strike would result in their death. He couldn't live with that. He wouldn't shoot the innocent for revenge.

His bold rebuttal was enough to shut Orina up, at least for the time being.

"Then we run into the same problem as before. GARDIAN turrets are the pinnacle of point defense. If there were only a few we might be able to rush them, but with so many our shuttles will be gunned down as they enter the atmosphere. Casualties will be tremendous. Then we have to deal with an army of Geth and Krogan.", Fedorian said grimly.

Shepard leaned against the holotank and considered possible options.

"We could precision strike the towers from orbit. It wouldn't cause fatal damage to the planet and it would take care of the turrets, assuming you have weapons with a low enough yield. The downside is that I doubt we'll be able to take out a significant portion of troops without damaging the main facility, but it should take care of outer defenses.", Shepard asked.

"Our smaller turrets possess the low yield required for such a task.", Legion said.

Shepard stood up and put his hands behind his back. There was a way this could be done after all.

"Good. Once they're taken, we'll drop down and clear the ground for the rest of the troops.", Victus said.

"My team will land first and designate the targets for the strikes.", Shepard said.

Fedorian raised one of his brow ridges that passed for eyebrows. The plan was daring and exceedingly dangerous. It didn't seem possible that they could pull it off, but he then reminded himself that he was talking to the people who blew up a heavily guarded space station.

"Are you sure you can do it? There will be no way to extract you if things go downhill.", Fedorian said.

Shepard nodded.

"We can do it. As Spartans, we're the experts on this kind of thing. We're designed for suicide missions. If anyone can pull it off, it's us.", Shepard said reassuringly.

Victus recalled Shepard's comment about that earlier. They looked like they were prepared for it. That heavy armor wasn't for show. The humans possessed both the weapons and the technology to pull this kind of mission off. They could break a Krogan's bones with a swift kick. They possessed energy weapons that melted armor and seared flesh. They were the best shot at success.

However, there was still a problem.

"How do you plan to get onto the planet? A dropship will be easily spotted. Also, you'll need reinforcements. It's a bad idea for you to go down alone.", he said.

"Our dropship has a cloaking device. As for reinforcements, you need to pick the best of the best and send them to my ship.", he said.

Another Salarian stepped forward. This one had a slightly greener skin color than the others in his presence. He was wearing white body armor similar to that of Mordin.

"I am Captain Kirrahe of the Salarian STG. We should come with you. The Salarian STG is one of the most elite units in the galaxy. We can infiltrate and defuse any other groundside defenses.", he said.

Shepard thought it over for a quick moment. He had held off on contacting Mordin for fear of endangering him, but now he had no choice. The situation was desperate. As powerful as the Spartans were, he did not have enough to take on all of those turrets. The STG was among the most elite units in the galaxy. They certainly weren't Spartans, but they were close enough. He would accept their help.

"Very well then. Once we blow those towers, we'll send a signal and you can flood the planet with dropships. Legion, get your ships ready. STG, grab your supplies and come to the Normandy via dropship. I'll send you a slipspace beacon so you can receive our message. We'll be on our ship.", Shepard said.

Fedorian nodded. The plan was set. This was as close as they had ever come to catching the rogue spectre. Saren was a blight on many worlds. His armies had killed millions of people. The slaughter of so many turians could not go unpunished. It hadn't been a long war, but it had been a brutal one. Now it was time for Saren to get a taste of his own medicine. Only two fates awaited the rogue spectre. The first was death at the hands of Garrus or any other vengeful person. The second was being whisked away to a secret prison where he would be tortured and then killed.

It was so strange. The galaxy seemed to spiral into a cycle of conflict. First, the Rachni War was fought against the endless troops of insectoid creatures. They were horrifying. They were faceless masses of chitinous armor which could not be communicated with or

reasoned with. It took the Krogan to beat them.

Then they rebelled and the galaxy was once again rife with conflict. Walls of muscle and sharpened teeth slaughtered countless colonies and shattered millions of lives. Were it not for the genophage, defeat was a certainty.

Now it was Geth. The Heretic Geth stormed through relays and murdered millions. Unlike the Krogan, they showed no fury. The Krogan had those terrifying teeth and imposing head plates, like some kind of monster. The Geth had no face. They only had that single, haunting, glowing eye. They showed no fury. Their kills were not needlessly gory or excessively violent. No, they killed with cold, mechanical precision. When you killed one, another took its place. But it was still the same.

That was the difference between the Krogan, the Rachni, and the Geth. When you killed a Krogan or a Rachni, at least you knew that they were dead. You actually took something from them. The Geth were different in that they were immortal. No matter how many times you killed their platforms, those same programs would simply be reuploaded into a new one. You achieved barely anything by killing their platforms, because they would simply make more. They had no need for sleep or rest. They could keep making equipment indefinitely. No matter how many times you attacked, no matter how many lives you spend fighting them, the Geth would never die. They would simply come back stronger than ever.

Citadel Space was fighting an endless war against an enemy that could not be killed. There was no genophage that could be deployed to lower their numbers. However, they did have a single leader. The Geth could be hated, but everyone knew exactly who was giving the orders. Saren was the one responsible. Not faceless masses. Not walls of muscle. One man.

A part of Fedorian's mind strayed and looked at the path that brought them here. The countless sacrifices of brave warriors did not bring them any closer to defeating the rogue Spectre. The politicians and scientists could not defeat him. The turning point began with the humans. It was the humans who possessed the technological expertise to find the Geth's weakness. It was the humans who had the military prowess necessary to strike the crippling blow.

It was clear that they could do amazing things, but it was so vague as to who they are. They were as mysterious as they were powerful. Where did they come from? How did they discover such advanced technology? Did they develop it themselves? Why were they so reluctant to share? After this battle, the humans would not be able to hide for much longer. Sooner or later the press was going to put two and two together. When that happens, the humans would enter the galactic stage. It was unclear what their future would be. Would they become a menace like the Krogan? Would they become a powerful member of Citadel space? Perhaps they really were a vast interstellar empire that looked at the Citadel and laughed. There was no way to know for sure. However, one thing was clear: They would change the galaxy.

"Good. We have a plan. Everyone return to your ships and prepare. Dismissed.", Fedorian said in his typical authoritarian manner.

With that final word, everyone left the dimly lit room and returned to their various locations. There was much to be done, and little time to do it.

* * *

><p>Shepard marched down the darkened hallways of the Normandy. There was much preparation to be done before the attack. The slipspace drive had to be inspected, weapon systems had to be checked, gear had to be scrutinized for even the tiniest of flaws. The excitement before a battle is almost as much during one. Hundreds of conflicting emotions run through a soldier's veins, especially so with the younger ones. Shepard recalled those times, no matter how long ago they were. There was always the anxiety welling up inside you. You knew that one of your friends probably wasn't going to come back alive. You also knew that you were probably going to have to shoot someone, and maybe even kill them. He knew the feeling. It wasn't too long ago that he felt that way.<p>

Now it was different. He was a veteran. He could gun someone down without a second's thought and he wouldn't feel anything at all. Sure, at first killing someone is something you hate. After that first person? It's easy. They were an enemy. If you didn't kill them, they were going to kill you.

Shepard knew better than anybody. He recalled the eleven years of his life he spent as a warrior. Most of them were spent putting down terrorist cells who disagreed with the way the Alliance was handling things. He was instrumental in executing Executive Order #16 on Torfan. They were being idiots, and Shepard had no mercy for them. Humanity would never survive if it devolved into hundreds of disjointed states. Killing other humans was unsavory, but it had to be done if humanity was to remain united. Traitors would receive no mercy.

That, however, was not what really weighed on his mind. He knew the Spartans would do their duty, and the aliens seemed highly competent. Killing people was not going to be an issue. What bothered him was what would happen after the battle. It was likely that this battle would decide the fate of the war. After that, he would be out of excuses. There was no way he could hide the truth-that they were stranded- forever. He promised them Alliance diplomats. Garrus was unusually perceptive, but the others would eventually catch on that something wasn't right. With Saren out of the way, they would start pushing him for answers. It was already clear they were interested in military technology. They knew of slipspace, the key to galactic power. They wanted it, he was sure of that.

He knew that this "Citadel" civilization was far from being a pushover. After this display of power, it was clear he had underestimated them. They had reached a tremendous technological level without slipspace. While they could not possibly beat the full military might of the UNSC, they did have a huge military as evidenced by the fleet the Normandy was in. Mass accelerators were the most powerful small arms kinetic energy weapons he'd seen since the gauss weapons, and it took less force to fire them. He also knew they had some kind of programmable matter known as omni-gel. It was an interesting technology, one he hoped to one day see widespread use in the Systems Alliance. Humanity did not yet have access to effective programmable matter, at least not in any useable fashion.

It was probably one of Section 3's many projects. He knew the Forerunners most likely had it since they apparently had everything.

It would be easy to ask the Huragok to whip some up. It was no trouble for a creature that can manipulate technology on a molecular level. However, he knew that it was best not to do so. The Huragok were indeed wonder organisms, but they were also a trap humanity was trying very carefully not to fall into. The UNSC was paranoid enough to realize that it was needed to understand the miraculous technology. Simply using it was not enough. The Covenant's ultimate demise came from over reliance on the Huragok, and humanity would suffer the same fate if the creatures ever died off or switched sides. It was apparent they had no real loyalty except to the Forerunners, who were thankfully long dead. It was important to know and understand the technology being used, otherwise humanity's infrastructure might suffer the same fate as the Covenant.

There was much that could be gained by allying with these aliens. They were more powerful than they first appeared. These aliens' strength did not lie in advanced technology. Their strength came in the form of unity. With some fortune, they could put aside their differences and come together for a common cause. Humanity could do the same in dire situations, but not with so many races with such a long history. The brief alliance with the Sangheili was one of convenience that ended with cold bitterness and a silent vow to one day get revenge. He knew it was too early to determine for certain whether this alliance he had aided in constructing would hold, but the history of this galaxy was evidence of the fact that these aliens could indeed coexist with each other in a way humanity could never do with the Sangheili. They lived for thousands of years, side by side under the Citadel Council's leadership.

Not a bad quality to have. If humanity had their help in the War, I imagine things would have gone much smoother.

The more he examined the alien civilization, the more he understood a key principle to their society, and one that ensured their continued survival. They were stronger together than they were alone. The Turians were obviously the military power, but apparently their economy was woefully weak without their subjugated species, the Volus. The Salarians were the stereotypical brains of the galaxy, but could not mount any sort of real defense without Turian aid. The Asari were apparently the political oil, greasing the wheels just enough to make things work. However, they couldn't be a truly effective fighting force. They were too disjointed. They relied on each other in a symbiotic fashion. They would have all died long ago without this trait. They rise to face a challenge together, not alone.

They were humanity's opposite in that respect. Humanity internalized everything from technology, medicine, science, the economy, and most importantly information. The government went to great lengths to prevent technology from falling into alien hands. Even the latest pistol designs were closely monitored. Sure, there were always a few foolish souls who tried to sell a cache of weapons to a cell of wanna be Insurrectionists or worse, to the Kig-Yar, but they were always met with swift legal action. They simply couldn't take the risk that it would fall into the hands of the Sangheili. Great care was made to

make sure that not a single dollar escaped from the Alliance's economy and into an alien economy.

Information control was even more strict. Every computer was required to use the Standard Hard Code Encryption by law. The government had the ability to alter this code on any computer in the Alliance to keep it up to date. Everything from personal email to the local gravball scores were encrypted. With everything using the same level of encryption, finding classified messages would be like looking for a needle in a haystack for any seeker program. It was part of ONI's plan to keep any possible alien hackers out of humanity's systems, despite how unlikely that seemed.

It irritated him. Security was becoming a shield so heavy that humanity was eventually going to have trouble bearing it. There was nothing he wanted more than an invincible humanity, but the path to invincibility increasingly appeared to be one that could not be walked alone.

Of course, having allies did have it's problems. The civilizations of this galaxy seemed too symbiotic, almost dependent on each other. If forced apart, they would fall like dominos. It was important to avoid that scenario. Furthermore, allies tended to want things, such as slipspace.

Giving away slipspace to other races was not something he was supposed to do, not without permission. Doing so was essentially giving away state secrets. Human ships could traverse space at incredibly high speeds compared to this civilization's measly 12 light years a day. Slipspace was something everyone was interested in learning about. A good deal of the government's budget went to slipspace research. The data cache on Shield World Trevelyan went a long way in terms of understanding the mysterious set of dimensions, but there was still so much to be learned. It was hard enough competing with the Sangheili in terms of slipspace. The Sangheili were an intelligent race. They didn't possess quite as good a version as the UNSC, but they were catching up fast. Adding another variable could just make the arms race worse.

Then again, it could help. If humanity teamed up with friendly aliens, it would undermine the growing xenophobia in human culture. Legion was right. Humanity couldn't survive alone forever. It was suicide, as evidenced by the Forerunners. Their policy doomed them once the Flood arrived. If further uplifted, these races could make valuable allies.

However, that was beyond his power. He was a Commander, not the president. He didn't have the power to pull off something like that. He would need help. He was a symbol, but not one powerful enough to do something like that. That was a problem that would have to be dealt with later.

Shepard walked into the Engineering room. It was humming with technology far too advanced for him to fully understand. Everything was very pristine. There was not a speck of dirt or other contaminants on the ground. The engineering instruments were in perfect order as well. It reminded Shepard of Falls Slower Than Most's obsession over cleanliness. He, or it, liked having a clean workplace. It wasn't particularly difficult for a Huragok to achieve this. Their tentacles could manipulate technology on a microscopic

level. However, that did him no good in finding the engineer.

Falls Slower Than Most was not in his usual spot, meaning he was probably in his "lab", for lack of a better word. Shepard turned to the left of the Engineering room and found the door to the engineering lab. The door's motion sensor activated as soon as it detected Shepard's presence and the door opened with a swift motion. It made a very small clicking sound as it opened, revealing Falls busy at work.

Falls was floating around a stainless steel table. He was manipulating several mechanical parts he had taken apart using his tentacles. On further inspection, Shepard realized they were weapon parts. This was evidenced by the stripped Battle Rifle and Vindicator assault rifles neatly placed on the desk. All the different components were sorted into various groups and separated into different locations on the fairly large table. In addition to this, multiple UNSC pistols were set out on the table. Many had been stripped, but a few were still assembled. Some even looked modified. Other materials laying around were various metals and energy sources, as well as...element zero.

"What are you doing with all these things?", he said.

Falls continued to work on his project.

"I am building new weapons using mass accelerator technology. Current mass accelerator weaponry in possession is more effective than 90% of currently fielded kinetic weaponry. Functions similar to gauss weaponry, except can conceivably be miniaturized in ways gauss weapons could not. Gauss weapons require more energy to move projectile, and the energy source is difficult to miniaturize. This prevents Gauss guns from being any smaller than a light machine gun. Element zero eliminates this problem by decreasing the amount of force necessary to move the projectile. I am applying this to our kinetic weapon stock.", Falls Slower Than Most said with the new voice translation software given to him.

Shepard smiled. There was a reason there was a Huragok on this ship. Any Huragok can take apart technology and tell you how it works. They were a key part of reverse engineering Forerunner tech for that reason. They could take any piece of technology and upgrade it with Forerunner technology, much of which the Alliance and UNSC had yet to understand. This was where the policy of "No applying Huragok upgrades to ships until we understand it.", which made perfect sense in his eyes. The Huragok had no loyalty except to the Forerunners. They could defect from the Alliance as easily as they defected from the Covenant. There was no sense in falling down that trap. Fortunately, the scientists down in Section 3 didn't have a great deal of difficulty figuring out how the technology worked.

"So what have you got for me?", Shepard asked.

Falls put a few finished weapons out for Shepard to view.

"Using various disassembled parts I have managed to create weapons. These are superior to the chemical propellant slug weapons still used in the UNSC forces. Using element zero, I have managed to create the next generation of kinetic weapons by successfully miniaturizing the coil gun. I have successfully adapted the design used in the rifle I

built you previously to a BR85 Heavy Barrel Service Rifle. It has the added benefit of being a design UNSC soldiers are already familiar with. There was one difficulty.", it said.

"What was the problem?", Shepard responded.

"The traditional ammo method currently being used by this model of weapon may be insufficient for our needs. It is highly versatile and can potentially be useful against adapting shields, but that is not enough. It can penetrate armor fairly well, but it has had immense difficulty penetrating our higher powered shields. The projectile's low mass prevents it from having the necessary inertia needed to penetrate the shields. My first attempt to solve this was based upon increased rate of fire. I adapted a thermal coolant system for the weapon, but it was still insufficient. The rate of fire was able to weaken the shields, but not drop them before it overheated. I decided that the penetration was insufficient. After trying several other designs, I went back to the standard magazine being used by our other kinetic weapons. The result was this bullet.", it said and lifted up what looked like a full metal jacket armor piercing round.

That kind of round was commonly used in the assault rifle category, but this one was slightly larger. It had a blue stripe painted on the nose of the bullet.

"It is a modified full metal jacket projectile. It can be fired from the element zero battle rifle I developed. The projectile's mass is reduced by the rails when fired out of the gun, allowing it to travel farther and use less force to fire it. However, it's mass will increase once it senses it is about to hit a target. This will increase the projectile's inertia tremendously and thus will not be as easily stopped by shields and armor. It has proven effective even against Spartan shields in simulations.", Falls Slower Than Most said.

Shepard fingered the bullet and examined it closely. If Falls was correct, then this could change kinetic weaponry forever. It was exactly what they needed. If it could break Spartan shields, it could definitely break kinetic barriers. The lower ammo count was going to be a major downside since it meant more magazines would have to be carried. However, the stopping power would make up for it. Shepard understood the reason, however. MJOLNIR shields were adaptive. Standard mass accelerator rounds would crumple upon contact with shields, but eventually the armor would learn a way to counter the massive amount of energy being transferred. The only way to beat adaptive armor was to kill it quickly enough to prevent it from adapting to the tactics. The new weapons would be capable of doing that.

Shepard then noticed that there were hundreds of these bullets neatly stacked in containers. He knew Huragok were very industrious, but even they needed supplies. The UNSC had yet to figure out how to replicate Forerunner industrial capability. Where did it get supplies?

"Where did you get the materials to make all of these things?", Shepard said.

"I altered many of our kinetic energy weapons and bullets as well as using up some of our element zero stock to create them.", Falls

said.

Shepard was slightly frustrated that Falls had been disassembling their weapon supply for it's experiments, but the new tech was worth it. They would need every advantage.

Shepard examined the table's other contents and noticed a black pistol that looked vaguely like an M6C/SOCOM. Shepard picked it up and aimed it towards a wall, aiming down it's sights. It felt heavier than other SOCOMs he had used in the past. It had what looked like a smaller barrel underneath.

Falls Slower Than Most noticed him holding the weapon. He typed in a description onto the tablet at lightning-quick speeds and handed it to Shepard.

"I also modified your M6C/SOCOM since it is your preferred pistol. It retains its silenced function and fires a slightly smaller projectile than the Battle Rifle does. It does not have as much power as the rifle projectile, but is more compact. It is also capable of releasing a charged blast of plasma, but far less than a normal plasma pistol since it requires a smaller energy cell. ", it said.

Shepard examined it more closely. It was a good upgrade and it solved one of the biggest issues of energy weaponry. Energy weapons could inflict severe damage due to heat and they were highly effective against shields, but they were bad for stealth operations due to the fact that they glowed. Kinetic weapons could be silenced. While he didn't usual kill people unless he had to do so, it was good to know he could without without alerting everyone else in a square kilometer. The added ability of releasing a plasma charge similar to that of a regular plasma pistol would also be helpful in case he ran into a situation where he would need plasma.

Shepard picked up the tablet.

"Good job. Make sure there are enough for the Spartans. I have other tasks to do. Also, tell me next time you decide to pillage the armory for materials.", Shepard typed.

Falls read the tablet and acknowledged Shepard's command with a nod. Shepard then picked up the pistol and attached it to his waist. He then walked out.

* * *

><p>The atmosphere on the observation deck was picturesque view of the stars and the calming quiet of the soundproof room made it an ideal place to practice his mental exercises necessary for his biotics.<p>

Kaidan watched as a shining metal sphere the size of a baseball floated by his head like a tiny jellyfish, suspended in the air by a mass effect field being generated by Kaidan himself. The blue aura surrounding it was like a mystic flame with powers not even imagined by the ancients themselves. Moving the sphere was a part of his daily exercises. Early in his training he realized that physical strength was not the key to having control over mass effect fields. It was ultimately control of the mind that allowed one to manipulate the

extraordinary phenomenon.

He learned this through peaceful concentration and focusing of the mind. He normally was able to do this quite well. He was the introspective type. However, today his concentration was scattered among thousands of thoughts. So much had happened that seemed impossible. They were about to take part in a battle that would determine whether a monster lived or died. They were about to rescue EDI.

He never thought in a million years he would actually be fighting alongside multiple alien races, let alone in an entirely different galaxy. He had been taught that aliens were the bad guys. To fight alongside them, despite all that happened, was an unprecedented act.

Then again, Commander Shepard isn't one to rely on precedence., Kaidan thought.

The memories of his conversations with the Commander flashed through his mind. The UNSC was growing to a scale it had never reached in its entire history. Xenophobia and paranoia were only a few steps away from swallowing humanity. Humanity controlled virtually everything in the Milky Way galaxy, opposed only by the Sangheili. They didn't trust anyone because they didn't have to trust. The Alliance could use its sheer military might to acquire just about anything it needed.

Any colony who tried to secede from the Alliance was doomed. The UNSC could have troops deployed anywhere they wanted before the backwater colony could even raise a decent defense. If several colonies tried to organize a force, then the UNSC would be especially brutal. Insurrection had a history going back since before The Great War. That was what the Spartans were originally made to stop anyway. In recent history, the most famous example was the Torfan Insurrectionists and the Blitz. Insurrectionists on the moon of Torfan and the planet Venezia decided to strike back at "the oppressive fascist government" and invaded Eridanus II using a fleet of ships cobbled together. They did tremendous damage to the colony, which was still recovering from the war. Kaidan remembered that this was where Shepard came in.

Shepard, aka Hammer 1 at the time, took his team to Torfan and paved the way for the UNSC invasion of the moon. The battle was included in every UNSC history book as an example of using Spartan forces in an invasion. It completely glossed over the fact that only Shepard survived the ordeal. The history books even made the battle sound glorious. However, from his brief conversations with Shepard he knew it was anything but. Kaidan knew that the battle affected Shepard in ways he wouldn't share. Kaidan knew the mind. He knew behavior. He knew guilt when he saw it. Shepard was a man with a heavy soul. It was evidenced by the Commander's melancholy and cynical views. He was soaked in the blood of his comrades and terrorists, and it weighed heavily on him. The cold, calculating, ruthless Shepard was not all there was to the man. He had a heart. It was buried underneath a suit of MJOLNIR armor and cybernetically enhanced bones, but it still was there. He could feel the world around him slipping away. His perceptiveness was what made him powerful, but it also was torture.

Kaidan could understand why. Shepard was probably one of the best Spartans in existence. He was the Hero of Torfan. He seemed legendary. There were only a few beings who surpassed his fame among the Spartans.

The Spartan IIs were among them. Names like Frederick-104 and Kelly-087 were legendary among the Spartans, because they were the first. They fought the Covenant tooth and nail and survived when no one else could. Several of their missions had recently been declassified, and they were required reading for every Spartan candidate. How they survived through it all was amazing. They were living myths, and if you were lucky you might spot one of them on Pinnacle Station.

Noble Team was another, the brave Spartans who gave everything so the human race could survive Reach. They were the unsung heroes of a bloody war for survival, and they deserved to be remembered. There was a monument on Reach for them and all the Spartans who died there.

Then there was the greatest inspiration of all. The Master Chief. He was the greatest hero of the war. He was like a myth, his feats so great that they seemed unreal. He was there for it all. His presence was said to have an almost unnatural moral boost to it, so much that it could turn the tide of a war. His name was forever linked to the word "Spartan". He appeared on nearly every recruitment poster in existence.

He realized that Shepard was right. Humanity was still at war, they just didn't realize it. Society couldn't get wartime mentality out of its head. Everyone was expecting a fight to show up on their doorstep any day. Humanity was more prepared for war than it had ever been in the entirety of its existence.

Maybe that wasn't such a bad thing. They had already learned the hard way that the galaxy was a less than forgiving place. Kaidan frowned and shook his head in a manner that was barely noticeable. The hidden history of the galaxy came to his mind. This was a history that far predated the Torfan Revolt, the Great War, and even the early Insurrectionists. It was a history that even he did not know fully. Not all of it was available to the public; but if you go looking, you can find the truth.

The Forerunners thought themselves above all others, the enforcers of "The Mantle". What good did that do them when the Flood came? We're going the same way. We need allies, not enemies. Nor do we need vassals. We need real allies who can stand beside us when our equivalent of the Flood comes for us, as something like that inevitably will.

Kaidan finally let the ball drop into his armored hand. It was an unspoken fear among humanity that another Covenant could happen, and he imagined that HIGHCOM felt the same about the Flood. There was a reason Spartans spent a good deal of their training fighting theoretical Flood outbreaks in the simulator. Having allies would certainly help if they ever came back.

Unfortunately, they could never be great allies until they had

slipspace. Being limited by the mass relays would make it difficult for them to travel vast distances. If they gained the power of slipspace, they could be a galactic power. He knew there were many things that could make them powerful if they learned to use them. Mass accelerators made potent kinetic energy weapons. The alien armies were incredibly huge in comparison to the UNSC's still dwindling supply of flesh and blood to use as infantry. However, it would be useless without knowledge of slipspace. Until then, they couldn't possibly be able to stand up against the likes of the Sangheili.

__Maybe __I__'__m __looking __at __this __wrong__. __Shepard __came __thinking __they __could __be __an __ally __of __some __sort__, __useful __for __his __machinations__. __He __wants __them __to join __us__, __whether __he __knows __it __or __not__. __Maybe __it__'__s __the __other __way __around__. __They __aren__'__t __here __to __save __us__. __We__'__re __here __to __save __them__..

It made sense. He examined the circumstances. The Normandy was the most powerful ship in the fleet at the moment. It carried the most advanced technology. The Spartans had the most advanced armor. They weren't the ones in need of saving, the aliens were.

__I__'__m __a __Spartan__. __It__'__s __my __job __to __protect __humanity__, __not __care __about __aliens__. __That__'__s __exactly __the __opposite __of __what __I__'__m __supposed __to __do__. __Aliens __are __supposed __to __be __the __enemy__..

His discussion with Garrus and Tali came to mind, and he stared at his warped reflection in the metal sphere he held. These aliens weren't some kind of big, scary monster with a never ending thirst for human blood. They weren't scheming to glass a human world. They were fighting for their own survival, just like humanity did. They weren't that different from humans. They were ordinary people, with flaws and strengths like any other person. They weren't something that hid under your bed and waited to attack you at night. In the end, they were just people.

That made them worthy of protecting.

Garrus walked into the room with a stride that made it seem as if he were floating. He was wearing his typical battle-worn blue armor and had his eyepiece on. Kaidan began to wonder if he ever took that thing off.

"Hey, Kaidan. Sorry to intrude. I figured I would check out the view before we entered FTL.", Garrus said.

Kaidan nodded and Garrus took a seat on the surprisingly comfortable couch facing the large plasma window. He took a moment to soak in the view. Millions of stars dotted the vast expanse of darkness. It never ceased to amaze him how something so far away could shine so brightly. Just one, insignificant star could shine and someone light years away could see it.

Kaidan tossed the metal sphere back into the air and caught it with his biotics again.

"Are you ready for the battle?", asked Garrus in an attempt to strike up a conversation.

Kaidan nodded.

"Yeah, I say we're all set. The ship is in good condition and our weapons are clean and ready to go. How about you? You ready to put a bullet in Saren's head?", he said.

Garrus smiled at that. At least he wasn't the only one eager to finish this war.

"Absolutely. He's had this coming for a long time. He's going to pay for everything he's done. I'll make sure of it. My sniper rifle is calibrated and I'm ready to go.", Garrus said.

Kaidan fiddled with the metallic sphere again using his biotics.

"I may not know this conflict as well as you, but anyone who kidnaps a member of our crew will not escape our wrath. He's as much our enemy as he is yours. Between you, me, Shepard, Ashley, Vega, and every other vengeful soldier out there, Saren is doomed. We'll finish this here.", Kaidan said confidently.

Garrus gazed out the plasma window at the massive fleet they had assembled. If there was any time to put a crippling blow to Saren's war machine, it was now. They had the strength to do it. Kaidan was right. Between all the forces at their command, the odds of Saren escaping were incredibly slim. It didn't seem real. So much had happened over the last few days. With the discovery of the humans, everything had changed. Before their arrival, the galaxy was on the brink of defeat. The Geth ravaged entire worlds virtually unopposed with their superior technology. They had better shields, more powerful mass accelerators, better point defense, bigger ships, better industry, they even had plasma weapons.

It was a rude awakening to the galaxy. The Geth had taught them a few valuable lessons. The first was that the future of warfare would be dependent on technology. Churning out ships and arming soldiers wasn't going to be enough to fight an enemy like the Geth. They would simply come back. The Rachni were a similar threat, if they ever returned. Even with the help of the Krogan, wiping them out was far from easy. If the Krogan birth rate hadn't been so high at the time, the loss might have been felt even more. The writing on the wall had been there since the Krogan Rebellions. The Genophage did more to defeat the Krogan than anything the Turians or the Spectres did. The Humans reiterated this lesson. With a single computer virus, they managed to trace the nerve center of the Heretic Geth and take it out. In the few days of their appearance, they did more damage to the Geth than the entire might of the Citadel military. The future of warfare would be based around tech, not sheer force.

The second lesson was that the galaxy could no longer afford to be so conservative. Restrictions on technological development were what prevented any viable super weapon from being developed. In the end, it was ultimately an AI—a banned technology—that enabled them to deal a crippling blow to the Heretic Geth. The irony was not lost on Garrus. It was clear that it was time for a more aggressive approach to studying and creating technology. The political will was finally there.

Garrus frowned. For the first time in his life, he began to wonder if

that was a good thing. He was never one for politics. They always seemed to get in the way of things. Red tape was what prevented him from going after Saren, after all. He should be feeling relieved that the same scenario probably wasn't going to happen again. However, for some reason he didn't. Things were changing. The Council, an organization that had stood for generations, was beginning to lose power. Their ultra conservative approach did the galaxy no favors when Saren and his Heretic Geth started sacking colonies. This resulted in them not only losing the majority of galactic population's support, but also the Hierarchy's as well. It was a troubling development. He didn't exactly like the Council, but they were a necessary element for galactic civilization to exist. Without them, the galaxy would be just like the Terminus Systems. He couldn't allow that.

Furthermore, the Humans would eventually enter the galactic scene. Shepard was an excellent manipulator, but even he couldn't hide the truth forever. It was in both of their best interests to keep interested parties away until the humans cleared up whatever catastrophe was going down on their side. Until then, Shepard was stranded.

__Look __at __the __bright side__. __You __know __where __Saren __is__. __You __have __powerful __allies__. __The __Geth __and __the __Quarians __might __get __back __together__, __if __we__'__re __lucky__. __Everyone __is __ready__. __We __can __end __this__..

Garrus looked at Kaidan, smiled and nodded.

"Thats good to hear. I'd hate to have you guys as an enemy.", Garrus said.

Kaidan let out a brief laugh.

"Me too.", Kaidan said.

With that, he finally gave up and let the ball fall into his hand.

* * *

><p>Two dropships exited the Fortress's hangar and sped towards the Normandy. The journey was short with their mass effect propulsion systems. They waited patiently as the solid metal doors retracted and allowed the dropships entry into the modified Prowler's hangar.<p>

Once inside, they landed softly. The side hatch on the rectangular prism-shaped drop ship opened and revealed the Salarian STG. The second drop ship opened and revealed several pieces of gear. The first sight to greet the special tasks group was that of Commander Shepard, fully clad in MJOLNIR VII armor. Vega was beside him in his armor as well. He waved them into the hangar.

"Welcome to the Normandy. Please, come with me. I'll get you settled in.", Shepard said through his helmet's speakers.

The Salarians stepped out and began to observe the hangar, noting it's design and features as they were trained to do. It was an important aspect of their training. Analysis was a big part of the

job, after all. They were scientist soldiers.

"Vega, get their equipment out for them.", Shepard ordered.

Kirrahe shook his head.

"No thanks. We'll handle it ourselves. Morlin, that's your job.", he said.

Morlin nodded and proceeded to removing the equipment from the other shuttle. Satisfied the youngest member of the team was doing a good job, Kirrahe turned his attention back to Shepard.

"I suppose we should get ready. We need to go over the details of your plan.", he said.

Shepard activated his Spartan vision to see if he could detect any bugs they might have on them. After a brief scan, he couldn't detect any. It was a nice sign of trust, not one he expected so soon. ONI would have taken a chance like this to bug every place they could. It seemed odd that the STG was being so accepting. He expected them to be a little paranoid. Without EDI, it would be difficult to keep track of them. He would have to keep them close and away from things like weapons and engineering.

"Very well. Follow me, the Normandy is not a good ship to get lost on. Vega, you're dismissed.", Shepard said.

Vega nodded and took his leave. Shepard began to walk and the Salarrians followed.

"This is an impressive ship. Apparently it was able to destroy several Geth ships with ease.", Kirrahe said, probing for information.

Shepard saw no harm in taking the bait. They probably already knew anyway, which made him wonder why they were asking the question at all.

"Yes. Concentrated pulse laser fire was enough to destroy the Heretic Geth's ships, although I suspect that they are not as of high quality as our Geth allies. Their hulls can hopefully stand up to slipspace's radiation."

"I hope so as well. It's imperative that the Geth fleet get through.", Kirrahe said.

The party consisting of Shepard, Kirrahe, Mordin, and Padok reached the hangar door. The motion sensor activated door opened and allowed Shepard and the Salarrians inside the darkened hallways of the UNSC Normandy. Their footsteps pounded against the grated metal floor as they marched down the corridors. Soon, they reached another room in the ship. In the center was a holotank roughly a fifth bigger than the one in the bridge. The walls were lined with computers of all sorts.

Shepard stepped inside the darkened room first and welcomed the STG inside.

"Welcome to the war room. It should be suited to your needs for the

time being.", he said.

He didn't mention that it was also a great place to keep any nosy Salarrians from snooping around his ship. True to form, the amphibian life forms continued to scan the room with their massive dark eyes. At least this room didn't have anything too classified in it. It was imperative that they not reach Falls. Garrus and Tali knew of it, and if they knew then it was possible the STG did. He imagined that the STG would love to get their hands on the creature. They were supposed to be allies of course, but that wouldn't stop ONI if given the chance.

Shepard was careful to watch their hands. Even if they hadn't carried any bugs in, he knew this particular civilization had a form of programmable matter known as omni gel. It was unlikely, but he didn't want to take the chance that they could synthesize one on the spot.

"So, you're the STG. I've heard good things about your unit. It will be good to have your expertise once we're down on the surface.", Shepard said.

Kirrahe turned his attention away from the metallic walls and video screens, then faced Shepard directly.

"Yes. We have heard interesting things about you as well. Hopefully your ship will help even the odds in this fight. We have not had much luck facing Saren's formidable fleet, but with the Geth fewer in number we stand a better chance. Thank you for that, by the way.", Kirrahe said.

Shepard took his helmet off and sat it down on a nearby table. There was no sense in wearing it until they reached Vormire.

"You're welcome. That victory came a cost, though. Our AI is down there. We have to get her back.", Shepard said.

The mention of AI understandably made Kirrahe and Padok uneasy, but Mordin oddly enough seemed excited at the prospects of seeing a functional AI.

"You humans have interesting technologies. AI is quite impressive. Stable AI has never been accomplished in Citadel Space. Most impressive.", Mordin said to Kirrahe's irritation.

Shepard smiled and nodded. Mordin could be a useful asset one day, if he lived through the coming battle.

"I heard you mention a minefield. We don't have any orbital mines, but apparently you do. Would you mind explaining how exactly we're going to do this?", Padok asked.

Shepard went over to the holotank and put together a brief demonstration of what they were about to do. An image of the system Vormire was in showed up and multiple red dots representing orbital mines appeared in the system.

"We'll drop out of slipspace a little outside the system. We'll do a quick head count to make sure all the Geth ships made it. Then, the Normandy will cloak and enter the system. We'll lay down nuclear

mines and then sync them to our IFF code. The Geth will also have this code. As long as a ship has the IFF code, the mines won't target it. However, the reinforcing fleet won't have this code. They'll charge into the system at full FTL without realizing the danger. Then, the mines will home in on them. The yield for the mines are massive, so I'm betting that we can destroy a good portion of the incoming fleet. The downside is that the enemy will be centralized in one location and they'll know we're coming, but by then they'll be softened up enough to commence the ground invasion. The challenge will be preventing them from detecting the Geth fleet, but the Geth aren't pushovers. They can handle it.", Shepard explained.

Kirrahe slowly nodded as he looked over the plan. He was familiar with the concept of space mining. The STG had attempted to construct a viable space mine some time ago, but they proved impractical due to the sheer size of space. There was no way to increase the blast radius to the point that they could actually be useful. Without a large blast radius, it would take a significant amount of mines to guard a system. The idea was scrapped. The humans apparently didn't suffer from this flaw. It was good to know they had such an effective force multiplier on their side.

"Good to know. What are your plans for the ground side of the battle? We're commandos, not soldiers. I'm not sure we would be a great choice for a straight up fight.", Kirrahe said.

Shepard pulled up the photos of the base on the holotank.

"That's why we're going in before everyone else. We'll designate the targets for the precision orbital strikes to take out the GARDIAN turrets. Then we'll infiltrate Saren's base.", Shepard said.

Padok stroked his chin.

"That could work. Between your ship and us, we should have enough ordinance to soften them up before the rest of the forces arrive.", Padok said.

Mordin began to speedily type on his omnitool.

"Agreed. Value of genophage data is incalculable. Must find out what Saren has been working on. If the cure has escaped the planet, we must find a way to counter it. Loss would have grave consequences. I concur with this plan.", Mordin said.

The door suddenly opened, revealing Legion. It was formidably armed with a Geth Pulse Rifle and what looked like a massive sniper rifle. It reminded Shepard of the ancient Barrett 50. used in the early 21st century, but he knew it was far stronger than anything they possessed or even in the UNSC arsenal. A rifle that large had to have a powerful mass accelerator and probably fired a large round.

His presence brought unease to the Salarian occupants, but Shepard was not phased. The Geth had no concept of intimidation. If Legion was there to kill them, he would simply do it. Since that obviously wasn't happening, Shepard chalked it up to preparing for the battle.

"Shepard-Commander, we are ready. We have acquired the beacon and simulations show a 97% chance of successfully following your

slipspace velocity. You may proceed when ready.", Legion said.

The intercom suddenly sparked to life.

"We're ready commander. All system are functioning at peak capacity. At max speed, we should be able to reach our destination in a day.", Joker said.

Shepard nodded to himself. Everything was shaping up to be perfect, but he knew there was no such thing as a perfect plan. Victory always came at a cost. The worst part was not knowing what that cost was going to be. He took comfort in knowing that he wouldn't have to think about it for long. In slipspace, time acted differently. To an outsider the journey would take a day, but someone inside slipspace would only experience a few hours, if that.

"It's good to have warriors of your caliber aboard for this mission. However, I have other matters to attend to at the moment. I will send an officer down to keep you company.", Shepard said.

Then he grabbed his helmet and left the room.

* * *

><p>A brisk wind hit Ashley as she evaded several plasma blasts. She hadn't thought this fight through as well as she first believed. Vega was a better tactician than she expected. She scolded herself under her breath for dismissing the lumbering giant as a fool when it came to matters of strategy. Indeed, he was not the most competent marksman or the fastest Spartan on the team, but he was smart enough to play to his strengths. His strength happened to be heavy firepower.<p>

Early on in the duel it came to her attention that Vega had trouble hitting targets in the darkness of the deep forest they had chosen for this fight. Since they both agreed to fight each other without resorting to armor powers, he wasn't able to use Spartan vision or the night vision built into his helmet. The only illumination on the false battleground came from the pinpoints of light emanating from the stars, the moon, and the plasma from Vega's turret.

Even with Spartan-augmented eyes, Vega seemed to have trouble seeing in the darkness. This made Ashley's usual hit and run tactic extremely useful. She had been popping out of cover and landing a shot from her shotgun, then retreating behind one of the massive trees before Vega could get a shot off. Each shot slowly whittled away the armored giant's powerful shields. It was a perfect strategy.

That is, until Vega decided it was easier to simply burn the forest down.

Wave upon wave of plasma blanketed the dense forest, the intense heat setting the wood ablaze. The rampage of the forest fire was not what concerned her. She had been in enough thermal simulations for MJOLNIR VII to have adapted to extreme heat. She was more concerned about the tactical situation. Ashley found that her supply of cover was rapidly diminishing under the blaze.

Her shield strength was hardly on the same level as Vega's. Even

without her reflex armor mod she was easily faster than any other Spartan on the team. She could dodge most fire coming at her. However, she knew she could not take as many hits as the implacable Vega. She also knew Vega had more than enough ordinance on him to finish her off. Running would be of no use if he decided to just glass the entire arena.

_Time __to __be __less __conservative__._

She set off on a mad dash towards Vega, rolling out of the way whenever the hulk of a Spartan released a spray of plasma. His shields were still up, but they wouldn't hold forever. Vega's main advantage was the large plasma turret he was carrying. Plasma weapons were powerful, but they had one major drawback: They got hot, and they got hot fast. The coolant pack on his back would allow him to fire for extended amounts of time. If it was damaged, he would have more difficulty firing the weapon.

She slid underneath his legs and fired her shotgun point blank at the coolant pack on his back, only for her shot to harmlessly be absorbed by his shields. Her hypothesis was correct. None of her current ordinance could breach his shields, and if she did they would probably regenerate too quickly for any significant damage to be done. The only way was if she could somehow damage his plasma-fusion hybrid power system. That would weaken his shields.

_But __how__?_

She took a cursory look around her. The inferno continued to blaze, and many stumps remained smoldering where once tall trees stood. The intense fire felled the trees as easily as any ax or saw could have done.

Then it clicked.

She ran towards one of the few remaining great trees in the dying forest and waited. Vega took the bait and flooded the air with searing-hot plasma. She barely dodged the incoming bolts in time. The plasma bolts slammed into the great tree, setting it on fire at the base.

Now the trick was to keep Vega in the same spot. Fortunately, this was not too difficult to do. Vega could move much faster than a normal human, but his type were trained to act as human shields. Movement was not their forte'. Ashley pulled her plasma pistol out and started to hammer the trigger. As she expected, Vega did not try and dodge. Such a weak plasma weapon would not pose any serious threat to him except when charged. Vega fell back on his training and kneeled, allowing his powerful shields and energy-weapon resistant armor to take the blow.

This bought Ashley the time she needed. She took her remaining plasma grenades and tossed them at the base of the tree Vega had recently sprayed with his plasma. The grenades weakened the base of the already-burning tree and it released an audible snap as the weakened base could no longer support the weight of the tree.

The tree was falling.

Vega realized this too late to move out of the way of the falling

tree. He did the only thing he could. He tucked himself into a ball-like form and amped his golden shields up until they were plainly visible. The tree smashed into Vega like a hammer onto a nail, burying him.

Ashley slowly eased out of cover, her shotgun raised. She had to confirm the kill. She slowly approached the log, careful to keep her footsteps quiet. Once she reached the fallen tree, she prepared to give it a swift kick when she saw it slowly move.

"No way...", she whispered under her breath.

Her fears were justified. Vega used his immense strength and pushed the log away, using it as cover from Ashley's shotgun blasts. He ripped a piece of a branch off of the smoldering tree and kicked the rest of the log towards her with all of his titan-like strength. Ashley leaped over it just in time to keep herself from being rolled into the forest floor. Vega used this opportunity to bat the shotgun out of her hands with his makeshift club, smashing it so hard the barrel bent from the impact.

She instinctively grabbed her plasma pistol and almost got a shot off when Vega ripped it out of her hands and crushed it. Realizing that it was suicide to keep this up, Ashley rolled out of his reach and drew her combat knife. The combat knife the common Spartan used was about twelve inches long, virtually unbreakable and the edge was sharpened until it was only a molecule wide. It could pierce even Vega's armor.

Now that she was a sufficient distance away, she could get a good look at Vega. His armor was battered and dented, the pack he carried on his back was leaking coolant and hydrostatic gel was oozing from the seams of the armor. Multiple pieces of plate armor were dented and his power supply pack was severely damaged. It was obviously still functional, given that his suit was not frozen up. The important thing was that his shields were down. He could be beaten now.

She madly charged towards him, leaping into the air and lunging for his neck. Vega saw this coming and used his Spartan-enhanced reflexes to swing his club to intercept the blow. Ashley compensated and slashed the club until it was only useful as firewood for the charred forest. Vega slapped Ashley aside when her concentration was broken. The blow forced the knife out of her hand and sent it flying into a nearby boulder covered in soot.

With neither Spartans armed with anything but their battered MJOLNIR armor and the will to win, they engaged in hand to hand combat. Vega wound up a punch and sent it towards Ashley, only for her to roll out of the way behind him and give him a powerful kick to the back. The force of the blow sent Vega lurching forward. He managed to recover and turned quick enough to grab Ashley as she was recovering from her kick.

He grabbed her by the waste and tossed her into the soot-covered boulder. Dazed by the impact and her armor failing, she saw the blurry image of Vega barreling towards her like a rhino eager to impale his horn into another beast. One tackle with the full force of his might would be enough to finish her.

There wasn't enough time to dodge. He would be on her in less than a few seconds at the speed he was moving. Without her reflex armor mods, there was no chance at evasion. She had no grenades left, no weapons. She felt around her for something, anything, that she could use and realized what was sticking out of the boulder right beside her head.

With a single swift motion, she pulled the knife out from the boulder and hurled it towards Vega with all of her strength. The knife spun around it's center and pierced Vega's helmet, going right into his skull.

His limp body tumbled to the ground and skidded across the forest floor, stopping just before he slammed into her.

She checked his life signs. Zero pulse. He was dead.

****SIMULATION****COMPLETE****

The charred forest disappeared into an empty room painted in dull gray. Vega got up. His armor was not damaged, and neither was Ashley's. They removed their helmets and clipped them to their side. The epic duel between the two Spartans was merely a simulation, a lucid dream conjured up by a machine. There was no lasting damage done. No forest had been burnt to the ground. No, it was all just practice.

"Remind me never to pick a fight with you.", Ashley said panting.

She was fit, but exercise like that was enough to make anyone catch their breath. Vega's incessant gloating over his toughness was justified.

Vega slowly got up and nodded.

"Same here. Although you got lucky with that knife.", he said.

Ashley smiled.

"Or you're too afraid to admit you got sloppy. A tackle? Really?", Ashley teased.

Vega released a painfully fake laugh.

"Ha ha. Point taken, we better be more careful on Virmire.", said Vega.

"True. I hear we'll be getting the aliens' help. I hope they don't drag us down.", Ashley said.

Vega shook his head.

"Nah. They know their stuff. If Garrus is any measure of their quality, I'd be happy to serve with them any day.", Vega said casually.

Ashley raised an eyebrow.

"You really think they're not all that bad, don't you?", she asked.

Vega simply shrugged.

"I'm not a politician. Put a gun in my hands and tell me what the objective is, and I'll do it. Give me allies worth their salt, I'm good with that too. I don't really care who they are.", Vega said.

Ashley leaned against the wall.

"So it doesn't bother you in the least bit that we're working with aliens? We've been trained to kill aliens the majority of our careers. It just feels...awkward. I guess you're right though. Garrus isn't a pushover and Tali can handle a tank as well as any UNSC soldier. It just feels weird.", Ashley said.

"Sure, it seems bizarre, maybe even impossible. Doesn't matter though. We're Spartans, right? We're made for this kind of thing. Shepard said things were going to get loco before we even signed on. An ally is an ally. Think of it this way: I'm sure you would kill any target designated for us. Whether it's Insurrectionists or aliens, they're still enemies. It's the same way with allies. If they're on your side, they're on your side. Doesn't really matter who or what they are.", Vega reasoned.

Ashley tilted her head to the side in concentration.

"Well when you put it that way, I guess it makes sense.", she said.

Vega walked over knocked on her head lightly wait for the sound.

"Nope. Your head isn't empty. C'mon, you're smart. Smarter than me. Just look past the fact that they're aliens and see as they really are: Allies." Vega said.

The two of them exited the simulation room and entered the hallway together.

"Don't sell yourself short. You're pretty smart too. Anyways, I better return to my quarters. There are still things to do.", Ashley said.

Vega simply nodded and they went their separate ways.

As she walked away, she considered Vega's words. They did make sense. She was a warrior, not a philosopher. There was no sense in losing any sleep over having alien allies. As Shepard had told her before, being tense didn't help things. Vega just reinforced the point. All she had to do was do her job and leave the political issues in Commander Shepard's hands. It seemed Vega was wiser than he knew.

Or did he know? She hadn't known him for long, but she couldn't shake the feeling that Vega was intentionally appearing dumber than he really was. It was clear that there was wisdom to his words, and he wasn't a slouch when it came to combat. There were many Spartans who

wouldn't have thought of his strategy. As much as she hated admitting it, she barely won that duel. It was good food for thought.

Shepard turned the corner and met her in the hallway.

"Ashley, I was looking for you.", Shepard said.

"Sir?", Ashley said.

"I need you to watch the STG. They're spooks just like ONI, and I don't want to take the chance that they might plant a bug somewhere aboard the ship. They're in the war room, as I'm sure you can find your way there. Be sure to get Morlin as well. Make sure he hasn't done anything.", he said.

She saluted.

"Yes sir."

Shepard nodded.

"Dismissed."

Ashley sped towards the War Room to occupy herself with her temporary job and Shepard made his way towards the elevator. He needed to think a few things through, one of which was what he was going to do on the ground. There was going to be a treasure trove of intel down in that base, but what he wanted most was the genophage cure.

He wanted a peaceful future with these people, but he wasn't naive. The numbers this galaxy commanded could overwhelm humanity if it came to war. He couldn't allow that. Should they turn against him, he would need a plan B. The krogan would be a nice contingency. The aliens were absolutely terrified of the idea of Krogan cured of the genophage. If they ever turned against humanity, all he would have to do is let Section 3 whip up a genophage cure they could control and unleash the Krogan. Fighting a war on two fronts would be impossible for them. He had no misconceptions. Humanity's fleet was powerful enough to defeat them with ease at the moment, but it could not be insured that that would always be the case. They knew of slipspace now. It was unavoidable. They would start looking for a way to build a translight drive. If they succeeded, their range would be increased tremendously. It would also mean being able to navigate in the Milky Way. He didn't like having to go behind their backs, but it was necessary.

It was decided. Once he reached the surface, he would infiltrate the research and development facility and steal the cure.

He found the elevator and ordered it to take him to his quarters.

* * *

><p>Tali made her way through the CIC, or bridge as the humans called it. She was surprised Shepard had allowed her back on his ship, but she chalked it up to keeping good relations with her people. It wouldn't look very good politically if Shepard made an alliance with the Quarians and then kicked her off his ship afterwards. He was too savvy to make that kind of mistake.<p>

So she found herself once again on the human ship. It was actually beginning to grow on her. Sure, the walls were coated jet black and the lighting was so dim she wondered if the humans had natural night vision, but it was actually starting to feel comfortable. Besides, as long as Garrus was around she could do anything. She was even beginning to miss the AI, EDI.

That thought stung. She never thought she could feel a connection to an AI, but the brief time that she spent with it, no, it wasn't an it. It was a her. EDI was an intelligent being, and thanks to her recklessness she was gone. The guilt ate at her heart. Tali stopped walking for just a moment.

She found some comfort in knowing that she wasn't trying to harm the AI. She was trying to save everyone from what she assumed to be a threat. All she did was try to help, and it didn't happen the way she expected. She swallowed her guilt. There was nothing that could be done now except undo what went wrong. They were going to rescue EDI. As long as it remained in her power, they were going to get EDI back or they were going to die trying.

What she had to do now was quite possibly the hardest part of it all. She continued walking and entered Joker's cockpit. He was busy managing all the controls necessary for the ship. He was wearing his typical baseball hat and jumpsuit. At first it didn't seem like he noticed her, but then he swiveled his chair around.

"Oh hey Tali. Didn't expect to see you up here.", Joker said happily.

His demeanor struck Tali as bizarre. Not too long ago, his best friend had been kidnapped. Why wasn't he saddened? Angry? The behavior was confusing.

"Yes, um, I decided to come up. I came to apologize. I was the one responsible for what happened to EDI. I only meant well, I didn't want this to happen. I'm sorry.", she said nervously.

It felt good to get that off her chest, but she still braced herself for the inevitable backlash from Joker.

"It's alright.", he said.

Tali's eyes widened under her mask at the surprising answer. She expected a firm, angry shouting. She expected a reprimand, not forgiveness. Not this soon. Wasn't he upset about the loss of his friend? She wasn't sure if the odd behavior was comforting or not. At least he wasn't yelling at her.

"So you're not angry at all?", Tali asked incredulously.

Joker shook his head back and forth.

"No, I'm angry. I was angry at you, but I'm not anymore. I'm not saying you weren't responsible at all, but ultimately you aren't the enemy here. Saren is the enemy. He's the one holding EDI captive, not you. He's the one I hate. Luckily, Shepard is going to skin him alive. You know, since he owes me a favor and all.", Joker said.

Tali paused in shock for a moment.

Joker let a flat expression on his face appear.

"I'm joking. Though I am ready to nail him. No one kidnaps EDI and gets away with it. Also, don't beat yourself up too bad. EDI is tough. She can survive a hacking attempt for a long time. As long as she's still down there, we have a chance at getting her back. That's all I care about.", Joker said.

Tali felt somewhat relieved at that. At least that was one person who wasn't angry at her. That would have to be enough for the time being. However, there were other things to do. It was time she take up the issue with the man himself.

"I'll see you later Joker.", Tali said.

Then she exited the cockpit and sped towards the elevator.

* * *

><p>The ride up to the Commander's quarters was much slower than she thought it was going to be. The elevator had an odd inconsistency to it. Sometimes it went quickly, other times it went painfully slow. The humans apparently weren't very good at elevator design. It was odd considering the rest of their ship was an engineering marvel. She would do nearly anything to get a look at the designs, except when it came to the point of crossing Shepard. There was no sense in attracting his ire again. There was no doubt in her mind that he would kill anyone if it meant succeeding in the mission. He wanted Saren as badly as anyone, that much was clear. At least that was one thing they had in common. Maybe she could use that to bargain, after she convinced him to let her fix the elevator.<p>

The elevator finally made it up to the Commander's quarters. She politely knocked. A camera looked her over and let her in. Shepard was sitting at his desk looking at a green tinted holographic computer screen. He didn't seem to pay attention to her presence, but she knew better than to assume that he didn't know she was there.

"Tali.", he said confirming her hypothesis.

She walked a little closer to his desk, somewhat intimidated by the powerful being behind it. He looked up and leaned back in his chair.

"I assume you have a reason to be here?", he said.

Tali nodded. This was going to be somewhat awkward. She swallowed and readied herself.

"I want a job. I'm tired of just sitting here and doing nothing. I want to help get EDI back.", she said.

Shepard clasped his hands together.

"Why should I? How do I know you can control yourself?", he asked.

She was pretty sure she could control herself. Her episode in the brig cleared up that issue. It was best not to go to war with the giant armored entities that could crush Krogan rib cages. That was a lesson she wouldn't forget any time soon.

"I'm a good engineer and you know it. Let me be an engineer on the ship.", Tali said.

Shepard went back to his computer.

"I already have an engineer.", he said.

Tali crossed her arms.

"Your tentacled friend may be a genius, but what if something happened to him? You're a planner, Shepard. You know that you need someone to help. Let me be that someone. All it will take is a quick crash course and I'll be ready.", she said.

Shepard paused for a moment to consider Tali's proposition. She was right about many things. The Quarrians as a whole were fantastic engineers, doubly so when it came to Tali. He would have thought she was part Huragok if he hadn't known any better. The question was loyalty. The fact was that she committed insubordination of the highest level. Sure, the way he handled things in the brig may have inspired some fear and discipline, but was it enough to put her back on active duty?

He reminded himself of her other, more important point. She was right. The Normandy only had one engineer, Falls Slower Than Most. The Normandy would be in trouble if it got injured. It seemed like a foolish thing to only have one engineer. However, this was a security caution. The Normandy could yield many secrets if captured, but as long as the enemy only had one Huragok they could never breed more. The drawback was that they only had one Huragok. Having Tali around would negate that disadvantage. It would also mean getting chewed out once he got back home.

However, he couldn't deny the truth. They were about to go into the biggest battle they had ever seen. Even Hackett and the rest of HIGHCOM couldn't have predicted that the Normandy would end up in a battle this huge. It was highly possible that Falls or any of the crew left aboard the ship could end up hurt. If that was the case, then Tali would be the only one capable of running it. She would be able to potentially record the designs of the ship's instruments and more importantly the slipspace drive. Just knowing how to manage the ship's engineering would make her dangerous in ONI's eyes. He knew that he was already pushing it by upgrading their ONI found out, the consequences would not be good.

On the other hand, what choice did he have? The Normandy had to survive long enough to make it back home. For once, he actually had reserves. He had to make use of them. There had to be a compromise.

"If I let you do this, you would have to learn some of instruments. My people could have you killed to prevent an information leak if they found out. You do understand that?", Shepard said.

Tali's face hardened behind her purple mask. She knew humans were

dangerous, but it was worth the risk. EDI needed her help, and she wasn't just going to sit by and let the AI get hurt. There was a wrong, and she had a chance to right it. The reward was worth the danger.

"I understand perfectly. I also understand that EDI needs my help. Let me do this, Shepard. Please.", she said.

Shepard rubbed his chin for a moment. Then he pulled a small device out of his desk and handed it to Tali. It was a small round object with a red glow. It fit perfectly into her palm.

"That is a transmitter. When it beeps, go to engineering. Now return to your quarters and wait.", Shepard said.

"Yes sir.", she said.

She began to walk away.

"Tali, one more thing.", Shepard said.

She turned back around and listened closely.

"Do not under any circumstances allow Miranda to catch you in engineering. She won't hesitate to make sure you don't escape this ship with your knowledge.", Shepard said with a dead serious tone.

Tali noted how he avoided saying death, but she knew that was what he meant. Tali quietly exited the room and entered the elevator once again. This time she was going to engineering.

Shepard watched her leave. He then checked his messages to see if HIGHCOM had sent him anything. They didn't always use the holographic communications device since it tended to be time consuming and power intensive. For simple files, messages were still the best.

There was one message that had been sent to him. It was labelled GEN2 and was shown as coming from ONI, which meant the Illusive Man was probably involved. He opened it anyway. It contained a message.

Shepard,_

Section 3 _has _been _cooking _up _some _armor
_modifications _I _think _you _would _be _interested _in_.
_As _you _know_, _the _Warrior _class _MJOLNIR _variant
_has _already _gone _into _production _and _is _showing
_excellent _results_. _It_'s _success _convinced _me _to
_authorize _an _entire _line _of _new _MJOLNIR _VII
armor, _dubbed _GEN _2 _by _our _scientists_. _They
_will _sport _a _greater _degree _of _customization _that
_requires _less _genetic _manipulation_. _I _want _your
_team _to _be _the _first _to _use _them_. _I_'ve
_attached _a _file _to _this _message _containing _the
designs. _Your _Huragok _should _be _able _to _produce
them. _Good _luck_. _

_CINCONI _Vice _Admiral _Jack _Harper_

Shepard checked and found the file. He opened it to take a look at what they brought him. He liked what he saw. If these designs worked correctly, they could help boost his team's power. He had to contact Falls and show him. Then he had to get the team down to engineering for an upgrade. As much as he disliked the Illusive Man, he had to admit that he always had the best technology.

He saved the file to his armor and hit the intercom.

"Spartans, report to engineering immediately. Everyone else remain where you are.", he said.

He grabbed a second transmitter from his desk. Then he got up and made his way to the now vacant elevator. It was time for an upgrade.

* * *

><p>The Spartans quickly made it down into engineering. Falls was there waiting for them along with Commander Shepard. He walked over to a terminal on the wall and uploaded the file for Falls to take a look at.<p>

The Huragok scanned through the file, absorbing all the information it had to offer. It contained information on all the designs MJOLNIR VII GEN 2 had available. Shepard had personally flagged variations he wanted installed on the team's armor. After absorbing the information, Falls turned back around to Shepard using it's ballasts.

"Can you do it?", Shepard asked with his arms folded.

He and the other Spartans were in full armor, a requirement for the upgrade to work. The Huragok just floated for a moment. It was like he was looking over the details once more in it's mind. It was a biological supercomputer, so this was standard behavior.

"Yes.", Falls said.

Shepard nodded and Falls moved forward to begin. His tentacles began to comb over every inch of the Spartans' bodies. Microscopic cillia started manipulating the armor on a molecular level, subtly changing it's make up according to the designs the Huragok had seen. The changes were subtle at first, but steadily became more pronounced as Falls continued the upgrades. Their once rugged plate armor was slowly being molded into a sleeker design. An odd looking camo configuration appeared on each of their armors.

Next, Shepard took off his helmet and handed it to Falls. The other Spartans followed suit. Falls repeated the procedure, using the same information to configure their helmets precisely into the form specified by the designs. The changes were great in variety. Nonetheless, there was a common denominator in that all of the helmet's visors were drastically reduced in size. Shepard assumed this had to do with the popularity of the Warrior configuration helmet. It placed greater emphasis on armor protection than visibility. That was one of the most notable changes to the helmet design post war. The visor was the weakest part of the armor. For all of humanity's excellence in creating tough materials, they had never quite succeeded in creating a form of transparent matter that could

stand up to the same blows the rest of the armor could take. Reducing the visor was the logical approach to the problem. Shepard wasn't entirely happy with that approach, however. Reducing the size of the visor meant limiting a Spartan's field of vision. Modern sensor technology was powerful and standard in all suits of MJOLNIR armor, but nothing could replace actual sight. Sensory equipment could break. A Spartan's augmented eyesight would not. He decided to stick with the change for the time being.

After a couple brief minutes, Falls's work was complete. Each of the Spartan put their helmets back on and got used to the new and improved interface. The Spartans held out their arms and fingers, slowly dissecting every little detail changed in their armor. The armor felt somewhat different. The new armor felt like it was a part of their body. It was like the armor had become a part of them. Spartans always seemed to develop an attachment to their armor, but this was different. MJOLNIR was always more of a vehicle than an armor. However, now it just like like a natural extension of their body. It was like they had gained a second skin. It felt considerably lighter than the previous version of their armor, but Shepard knew that the armor was still as tough as ever.

He took a moment to look at the other changes to the armor given to his team.

Vega was wearing what at first glance appeared to be a navy blue configuration of the armor that had been labelled Defender in the file. It was actually a heavily modified version of the armor. It had armor plating stronger than anything else in the room. It's shields were strengthened by a slightly oversized power supply and it's armor was coated with a refractive substance to dissipate energy weapons. He wearing a helmet that had a flat vertical rectangular visor. On his belt were several plasma grenades. With all of the new upgrades, he was a walking tank.

Ashley was wearing a slightly different version of the Commando armor. It was dirty white. It also used more sleek and angular in design. This would result in less air resistance as she moved, but at the cost of shielding and armor. That wouldn't be too much trouble though. She could outrun a cheetah if she absolutely had to. Her armor would help in the coming mission. There wouldn't be much time to grab the data once they hit the ground, and they needed every advantage they could get.

Kaidan was wearing a gray set of what appeared to be the new Rogue variant armor, but on closer inspection it actually was a specialized set designed solely for biotics. It would increase his limited biotic powers to combat effective levels. Given the enemies they'd already seen, having a strong biotic would come in handy.

Then there was Shepard. He was wearing a black and gray colored armor labelled as Wetwork in the file. It was apparently designed for assassinations. It fit the mission well. They were about to assassinate a high value target, and he liked to be dressed for the occasion. The tech it packed was interesting. In addition to all the features his old armor had, the angles and a stealth coating helped to keep him off of an enemy's sensors. Add active camo to that equation, and he was essentially invisible.

He walked over to Falls's workshop and grabbed the pistols and battle

rifles Falls had created, along with several clips of ammunition. What others didn't notice was that he also placed a transmitter there as well. He handed one of each weapon to the Spartans and handed out plenty of ammo. They attached the pistol and ammo to their belt and scrutinized their battle rifles.

"These upgrades will help us in the coming fight. We have Falls to thank for our new weapons. They're basically the same as the weapons our allies use, but they fire a more powerful bullet. Falls managed to put it in a Battle Rifle configuration, which I think we've all trained with quite a bit. The pistols are the same, and they are also silenced. We'll be using these weapons once we get on the ground. Are we clear?", Shepard said.

The Spartans readied their weapons and nodded. For a moment Shepard wondered if it was a bad idea to force so much change on them at once, but then recalled the reason he picked these Spartans. They were adaptable. Using this new technology wasn't going to be an issue. The only problem was that it might break down somehow, but that was the least of his worries at the moment. The more pressing matter of getting the fleet to Virmire was the one he focused on at the moment.

"Good. Move out.", Shepard ordered.

All of the Spartans clipped their helmets to their belts and went to the elevator. Shepard remained and turned to face Falls.

"Falls, I left a transmitter on your desk. You'll know once we're in system, so once we are signal the transmitter. An alien called Tali Zorah will come down here. She will be your assistant during the battle. You are to speak of this arrangement to no one. Understood?", Shepard said.

Falls nodded with his tiny head.

"Good.", Shepard said.

Then he went into the elevator.

* * *

><p>After stepping out of the elevator the team strolled through the bridge, paying close attention to the view screens that hung from the ceiling and lined the walls. They showed nothing but darkness. This was to be expected since slipspace had no visible light. It was just another mysterious feature of the curious dimension. That did not concern him at the moment, however. He had to talk to Joker.<p>

"How close are we to the destination?", Shepard said.

Joker stopped to check some of his instruments for a moment and then swiveled his chair around to Shepard. He seemed a little spooked at the sight of their intimidating new upgrades, but it quickly passed.

"We should be there right about...now.", Joker said.

His timing was impeccable as always. The ship dropped out of slipspace and back into the starry sea. Joker manipulated a few

instruments and pressed a few buttons, struggling to force the Normandy's slipspace drive to keep the portal open long enough for the Geth ships to make it out.

The portal strained as it widened and stayed open. This was very difficult since slipspace portals were highly unstable. Were it not for humanity's advances in slipspace, such a feat would have been impossible.

Wave after wave of the insectoid Geth ships poured out of the rift. First came the mighty Geth dreadnought with its escorts. Then came the other lower priority ships. All in all, it seemed as if the entire fleet had miraculously followed the Normandy through slipspace. The perilous journey would have to be remembered for future study. He had the sinking feeling that they might have to replicate this feat sometime in the future.

"Shepard, I can't keep it open any longer.", Joker said.

Shepard's expression hardened. He wasn't sure if they had all made it. However, he needed the Normandy to fly. He had no choice.

"Shut it down.", he said.

Joker swiftly obeyed the order. With a quick press of a button the portal collapsed. Shepard imagined that if the slipspace drive were alive, it would be feeling relieved from having to bear the heavy burden of keeping the portal open.

Now was not the time for such feelings. He had to check on the state of the fleet.

"Legion, did everyone make it?", Shepard asked over the comms.

The pause was excruciating.

"Negative, Shepard-Commander. The Geth fleet has lost two frigate class ships and one cruiser class ship. The Geth on board the cruiser were able to upload themselves to a dreadnought. Less than half were able to evacuate the frigates.", Legion said.

Shepard paused and soaked that in for a moment. He knew some people weren't going to make it in this mission, but it didn't lessen the sting when they died. He had no choice but to move on. The mission still had to be completed.

"Do we still have enough left for the battle?", Shepard asked.

"Affirmative. We are at 95% combat strength. We are capable of engaging the enemy forces until reinforcements arrive.", Legion said.

Miranda suddenly entered the bridge in her typical ONI too-normal gait. She eyed Shepard and the crew as they huddled around Joker.

"So we've exited slipspace.", she said.

Shepard elected to ignore her for the moment.

"Good. Now it's time for the next phase. The Geth fleet will stay here until we give the signal. We're going to recon ahead and start laying mines.", Shepard said.

He walked over to nearby computer and typed in a code. Then he hit a send button, uploading it to Legion.

"Transmit this code throughout the fleet. As long as it's in your IFF signature, the mines won't attack you. We'll contact you once we're back. Shepard out.", he said.

He wasn't so much addressing Legion as he was the rest of the Geth. Legion was coming with him on this one. If there were still Heretic platforms down on Vormire, then his expertise would come in handy. Everything had to be planned for in this mission.

"We should be close enough to reach Vormire at sublight speeds by now, so cloak and take us in. Call the STG and the rest of the team to the hangar as well.", he said.

Joker went back to managing the Normandy's instruments.

"Aye Commander.", he said.

Miranda approached him once the rest of the team had gone for the hangar. Shepard immediately took notice and turned around. He had a feeling that he knew what she was about to say.

"Shepard, you're going to need someone to manage the ship while you're on the ground. I volunteer for the job. I've had command experience before and I know how to fight a space battle. I'm the most qualified person on this ship to command, aside from you of course.", Miranda said in her flattering tone.

Shepard frowned. He didn't like the idea of the Illusive Man's personal agent commanding his ship, but she had a point. Joker couldn't handle everything, not in a battle of this scale. She had the skill necessary for the task. The question was whether she would be able to fight the way necessary. The Normandy was a Prowler, but it would have to fight like a destroyer. They couldn't afford to play support in this one. There were perks to the suggestion, however. Placing Miranda in command would prevent her from wandering around the ship and accidentally finding Tali in Engineering.

"Fine. However, I expect the Normandy to be an active part of this battle. Focus on the major threats.", Shepard said.

Miranda nodded with a serene smile on her face.

"Yes, Commander.", said and began to walk away.

Shepard lightly grabbed her shoulder and leaned uncomfortably close to her.

"One more thing. Don't try anything. I'm not thrilled by your presence, but I tolerate it. If you double cross me you'll live to regret it.", Shepard whispered into her ear.

Miranda didn't show any fear, but it seemed like she got the message.

Shepard took a deep breath. He was banking a great deal on Tali and Miranda's loyalty. If Tali decided to exploit her chance, it would mean a leak in technology to the aliens. Time will tell whether it was a good idea.

Shepard walked away. There needed to be one final meeting before the battle began, and there wasn't any time to waste.

* * *

><p>A few minutes the ground team was in the hangar with the STG. The elite Salarians stood in a line, determination printed on each of their faces. Garrus leaned against the wall in the corner of the Pelican and Legion was standing still. Garrus had an Avenger Assault Rifle attached to his back and was carrying a semi auto sniper rifle in his hands. Legion had a similar setup, except he was carrying the same formidable sniper rifle from before. The STG was carrying a mix of SMGs and assault rifles. The Spartans were sporting their brand new equipment. The STG was somewhat startled at their new gear, but didn't let it show for long. Shepard realized he left them alone for a while. He reminded himself to run a bug sweep after he got EDI back. First, he had to settle things.<p>

Shepard's helmet comms opened and revealed the smooth, condescending voice of Miranda.

"Commander, we're in system. The Normandy is cloaked and the nukes are ready. It was difficult without EDI, but we managed to calculate the enemy's most probable incoming trajectory. We'll start laying the mines.", Miranda said.

"Good. Take us in.", he said.

After that he took off his helmet and clipped it to his waist.

"Now that everyone is here, we should begin. We all know the plan. I briefed the STG earlier and the Spartans know as well. We're entering the next phase of the battle. As we speak, the Normandy is about to enter Virmire's system. Our stealth systems are active. Once we get onto Virmire's surface, there will be no support for us. The Geth will not arrive until we give the all clear and the area is mined. We all know what the objective is. We're going to get EDI back and we're going to kill Saren. Be ruthless. Remember all those who died in the defense of your worlds. Remember those who died at the cold hands of Saren's machines. It's time to remember them. It's time to get revenge.", Shepard said.

Everyone of their faces hardened and acknowledged Shepard's words. His statement reminded every Spartan just how surreal this all was. They were about to rescue EDI from hostile forces in a foreign galaxy. No backup or support. HIGHCOM couldn't send the fleet to bail them out if something went wrong. Whatever their mission had been before they arrived had been superseded. They had to get EDI back, and not just because she was a friend. Within her brilliant digital mind held the location of the transgalactic relay. She knew enough about humanity. If she had been compromised, things would get messy fast. They had to save her not because she was a friend, but because it was their duty to secure mankind's future.

The strong feelings were not only growing in the hearts of the

Spartans, but the aliens as well. They resonated deeply within their bones, shaking them to the core. Garrus felt it even more than the others. Shepard's words were like throwing gas on a raging inferno. The vehement rage that had built up in his heart since the beginning of all of this was coming to a head. No more running. No more hiding. Saren had to die now. There would be justice today, or he would die trying to get it.

The sweet and playful persona of Garrus Vakarian had been stowed away for the moment. Now, he was Archangel. He was the unstoppable force that craved justice for the innocent and would go to any length to get it. He was a truly terrifying being, especially for those worthy of his wrath. Saren just happened to be one of those people.

"Alright, Garrus, you're in charge of Alien Team until further notice. The Spartans are with me. Spartans, we have to assume that our communications are not as secure as before. We'll be using acknowledgement lights in this one. ", Shepard ordered.

They all followed orders and entered the Pelican. The Spartans loaded their weapons and ran a last minute systems check on their armor. Shortly after that, the Pelican cloaked and lifted off. It flew out of the Normandy and sped towards the planet.

In the meanwhile the Normandy remained cloaked and began the first attack phase. With the most probable trajectory calculated, all that was left was to place the nuclear mines. The Normandy maneuvered slowly to the edge of the system, careful not to be detected by some fluke of luck by an enemy ship. Battles could be lost by mistakes such as those.

The Normandy's nuclear mine bay located at the back of the ship depressurized and slowly opened up. It pushed ten high yield nuclear mines into the cooling chamber. Here, the mines remained and cooled to the temperature of the surrounding space. This would prevent their heat signature from showing up on sensors.

Once the mines had chilled to the correct temperature, they were jettisoned out of the airlock and into the vacuum of space. There they would remain until the mine's built in sensors detected a ship that didn't respond with the IFF code. Then they would home in on the ship and unleash a powerful nuclear blast that would annihilate one of these ships in a single blast. The Normandy continued doing this until its armament of mines had been laid in a grid formation. Any ship entering the system in realspace would run into the net of nukes and be utterly shredded by the overlapping nuclear blasts. With luck, that is exactly what would happen.

With it's task complete, the Normandy remained cloaked and retreated behind the outermost planet in the system. There it entered orbit around the small planet and reduced its energy consumption to further decrease their chances of being spotted. They would wait until Shepard sent the signal, and then they would call in the Geth who would be there in a few minutes. It was in the ground team's hands now.

The Pelican quickly moved into position over the planet. Shepard pulled up the pelican's external camera on his VISR which promptly revealed the enemy fleet orbiting the planet. It spoke volumes to him

about their law enforcement for so many mercenaries to exist. It was somewhat unsettling even for the Spartan as they weaved through the sea of enemy ships. The enemy fleet was as motley an array as the Saren Task Force. Ships of all shapes and sizes were in orbit. The larger ships such as cruisers and dreadnoughts were orbiting Virmire while several frigates were as low as the mesosphere. They were lined up so that they formed a shield of ships. Any ship that tried to reach the surface would have to go through the thicket of mass accelerators and kinetic barriers. Shepard frowned at the many ships. It was going to be more difficult to punch a hole through to land troops than he thought. The Normandy was going to have it's work cut out.

Fortunately, the enemy hadn't detected their cloaked Pelican. That would allow them to sneak by the fleet and land undetected. Shepard checked the Satellite he deployed here a while ago. A good landing zone was going to be difficult to find given the location of Saren's fortress. It's coastal location was surrounded with massive white cliffs topped with shrubbery. Small shallow rivers flowed in from the sea. It was the perfect fortress. The only way in from the ground would force them to travel through a pass filled to the brim with fortifications. This wouldn't be a problem for the time being, but once the troops started landing it would be difficult to maneuver.

Shepard highlighted a waypoint that was just to the side of the base. It was far enough into the maze of cliffs to avoid having to walk through any gatehouses, but far enough away to avoid getting spotted by guards as they disembarked.

The Pelican acknowledged the waypoint and dove into Virmire's atmosphere. Shepard held his breath for a moment. This is where they were most likely to get spotted. For the next couple of minutes everyone on board looked very tense, except for Legion of course. He was as stoic as always.

Garrus began fiddling with his sniper rifle, messing with the settings and occasionally switching the type of ammo he was using. Several of the Salarians seemed to be using their omnitools. Mordin looked as if he was theorizing about something. The Spartans just sat stock still. They all held their rifles in the exact same position. They were machines of war. As much as Shepard hated that analogy, he couldn't help but be proud of them. His old team would have approved. All he had to do was prevent them from suffering the same fate.

The Pelican touched down on the soft ground of Virmire. It uncloaked and opened it's hatch. The sight that greeted them was breathtaking. A golden star reflected off of the crystal clear water in the small river in front of them. The sand was so fine that it almost seemed to be microscopic. The warmth of the sunlight was cooled to just the right temperature by a gentle breeze. The blue sky above was dotted with puffs of white clouds. Beautiful chalky-white cliffs jutted up from the surface and was topped with gorgeous greenery. Bright green vines also occasionally snaked their way up the mammoth white cliffs. Virmire was a paradise.

"I can see why Saren chose this as his primary base of operations.", Ashley said as she took a look at the environment.

Shepard zoomed in with his VISR and scanned the area for enemies. It

wouldn't be good if a random guard happened to stumble on their landing zone.

"It makes a great fortress in addition to being a good vacation spot. This entire area is covered with passes formed by the cliffs. Satellite imagery shows several gate houses. If we land directly inside the base, our troops will be trapped with no means of retreat. If we land outside, they'll get slaughtered trying to get in. We'll have to blow up the gate houses before we land troops. We'll also need to tag the AA turrets for orbital strikes, There must be absolute precision. Spartans, link your VISRs with the satellite over us. It will provide tactical data as well as a map of the surrounding area. As for everyone else, your omnitools should be able to link into the signal as long as you're using the same radio frequency as your fleet.", Shepard said.

Mordin checked his omnitool to test Shepard's claim and managed to successfully link the the device to the tactical satellite.

"Correct. Satellite is compatible with omnitool.", Mordin said.

The other aliens quickly followed his example and linked their omnitools to the satellite.

"Do we have enough time to tag all of the towers?", Vega said.

Kirrahe pulled up the satellite imagery and examined it for a moment. On close inspection, he found something the others missed.

"I think I have a way around that. Do you see those three circular buildings? I've seen them in other bases Saren has constructed. They're power hubs. If we blow them up, it should shut down the power to the GARDIAN batteries. It may even be possible to turn them off.", Kirrahe said.

Shepard shook his head.

"It's not worth the risk of infiltrating and destroying them. We'll do this the easy way and laser designate them.", Shepard said.

He went into the Pelican and opened up the floorboard, revealing a vast array of weapons ranging from demolitions charges to assault rifles. He grabbed three laser designators and handed Garrus, Legion, and Vega one.

"Hop back in. We'll split up and land on the clifftops. It should give us a shot at each power hub and the gatehouses.", Shepard said.

They all piled back in and the Pelican flew upwards. The Pelican deposited the team on three different cliffs and flew away to hide. They lined up their designators perfectly, painting the hubs with a tiny red dot.

Now they just needed orbital artillery. The Normandy was the closest ship around, but he left it out of the plan for a reason. It lacked precision orbital artillery. The Normandy was a Prowler that had been upgraded to fight like a Destroyer. It wasn't equipped with precision

orbital missiles like a frigate. The Archer mk 2s were the lowest yield available on the ship. Guiding them to a precision target would be a nightmare. Other options were the pulse lasers and energy projector. The energy projectors on the Normandy couldn't be focused enough to wipe out something as small as these hubs with harming other facilities that might hold valuable information due to the fact that they were tacked onto the Normandy rather than built in. It would take a genius calibrator to pull it off. The pulse laser would have a better shot, but there was another reason why using heavy energy weapons in atmosphere was ill advised. It was the reason the UNSC still used MACs for ground turrets.

Massive energy weapons like energy projectors and pulse laser had a tendency to disrupt the atmosphere. Africa was still suffering from this effect. Since they wanted to preserve this planet, energy weapons were out. The bottom line was that the Normandy's upgrades were designed for space combat, not planetary sieges. That meant the only viable solution was use of the alien ships.

Shepard sent the signal through his VISR to the Normandy, which in turn bounced it to the Geth ships just outside the system. Now that they had the signal, the Geth fleet moved in. The gigantic mass of purple insectoid ships muscled their way into the system with their FTL drives and then dropped out.

The Geth Dreadnought reached halfway into the system and parked as the rest of the fleet charged forward with their mass accelerators blazing. It waited until one of the enemy dreadnoughts, in this case a large boxy ship with the Eclipse logo, was visible. That was all it needed. The massive ship opened up with its huge main gun. A horrifying three shot burst of projectiles moving at high speed slammed into the enemy dreadnought, reducing the craft to a pile of floating debris. The other ships noticed this and began to concentrate their fire onto the fearsome dreadnought. The overwhelming fire of an entire fleet chipped away at the hardened armor of the dreadnought, but it was by and large ineffective. The Geth spared no expense when it came to technological superiority. The armor and shielding on the dreadnought was too thick to be substantially damaged. Several smaller Geth ships engaged the enemy cruisers and frigates. Soon the entire force orbiting the planet was going at it. The mercenary ships were not nearly as well armed as the Geth, but they far outnumbered the machine race. Disruptor torpedo after disruptor torpedo was let loose from fighters onto the Geth ships. Several frigates were annihilated by the heavy guns of Turian designed cruisers. More than a few Asari craft were firing at the Geth as well. Even the Geth's superior shields could not withstand such a punishing volley for long. One by one, several Geth cruisers were destroyed.

Miranda watched the carnage from the view screens on the bridge. She waited for a moment to observe the weapons and tactics being employed by the enemy. Their weapons would certainly have difficulty piercing the Normandy's shields, but if they swarmed the ship the way they're doing the dreadnought they would eventually break through. She knew that they would have called for reinforcements by now, which were undoubtedly on their way. The only thing puzzling her was why they hadn't brought in the Sovereign yet. It would be more than a match for the Dreadnought, but it was safely parked on the dark side of the planet. Why wasn't it in the fight?

"Orders sir?", Joker asked.

Miranda tapped in a heading on a nearby computer.

"Take us in. We need to blow a chunk out of their defenses before our allies can send in the ground forces. Oh, and Joker, don't be conservative. They didn't outfit this ship with top of the line weapons for nothing.", Miranda said.

Joker smiled.

"Aye".

* * *

><p>Jona Sederis observed the battle raging outside of her Dreadnought, the Strangler, from the CIC's observation window. It was foolish to keep it open during battle, but she had to see this. She couldn't believe her eyes. One minute all was quiet and the next a fleet of Geth ships had descended on them out of nowhere. She just saw one of the Blue Suns' flagships get shredded by the Geth Dreadnought's main gun. Her other ships were also quickly falling from the barrage of Geth ships. To say she was displeased would be an understatement.<p>

"Concentrate fire on that dreadnought!", she ordered.

The order spread throughout the Fleet and their multitude of mass accelerators were focused on the Geth dreadnought. It was a risky move, but she couldn't let that dreadnought keep pounding her fleet.

The attack was bewildering. Saren had assured her that the Geth were on their side. Why were they suddenly attacking? Furthermore, where did this fleet come from? Dreadnoughts of that size don't appear out of thin air. More puzzling was how they managed to get by the forward defenses. Tarak was supposed to be guarding the Relay. A fleet that size couldn't get by his defenses, no matter the amount of drift. The concentration of forces was too much. The ships in orbit were merely the reserves.

To make matters worse, they caught them at the worst time. For some reason Saren insisted on keeping the Sovereign on the planet. That ship was their ace in the hole. Nothing the Council forces had could go up against it and win. Not to say that her forces were pushovers. She didn't know how Saren managed to build such a huge mercenary fleet at short notice, let alone get them to obey her command, but she did know that he had deep pockets. She was inclined to turn him down when he came to her with an offer to fight Citadel Space. It wreaked of trouble, but he was offering a tremendous sum of credits for Eclipse's participation in his war. The deal was just too good. That much money would be enough to upgrade her entire organization to top of the line gear. Apparently Blood Pack and the Blue Suns were enticed by the same deal. However, she knew there were much more personal reasons for Tarak's involvement. He was itching to get a chance at round two with Garrus. She thought it was bad practice to go hunting Spectres, but different strokes for different folks.

Two more of her ships got obliterated by Geth forces. She scowled. If she played her cards right, she could win this with sheer numbers

alone. The Geth fleet was big, but not as big as hers. All she had to do was hold out until the Sovereign was able to join the fight. Then these flashlight heads would get stomped.

This would be sped along by Tarak's arrival, of course. She signalled him the moment the Geth came in system. The combined forces of the orbiting reserve fleet and the primary defense fleet would crush these machines.

"Sir, there is an unknown ship approaching at high sublight speeds. It doesn't look like it's of Geth design.", one of the ensigns said.

Jona sighed. She didn't like incompetence. This felt like incompetence.

"Is it one of ours?", she asked.

The ensign checked her instruments again.

"Umm, no.", she said,

Jona rolled her eyes.

"Then shoot it!", she shouted.

"Aye!", the frightened Asari ensign said.

The dreadnought fired it's main gun at the incoming ship several times. All rounds impacted the angular black ship, but were harmlessly stopped by it's shields. Jona scowled. That many shots from the main gun was more than enough to destroy a ship of that size. Instead, the attack barely phased it. It kept barreling towards a cluster of cruisers and frigates. Between her dreadnought and the guns of the other ships, they would have more than enough ordinance to destroy the enemy ship. Was it on a suicide run?

Then she noticed the points of red light that were flaring into existence on the wings of the ship. She didn't know what they were, but her gut was telling her something was very wrong.

"Evasive maneuvers!", she ordered.

The huge dreadnought lurched to the right and just barely managed to avoid colliding into a nearby cruiser. It was just in time to see the unknown ship unleash a punishing flurry of lasers. The thin beams of red light blinked into existence and cut through a dozen frigates and cruisers. All that was left of the once mighty ships were multiple sections that had been sliced to ribbons by the heat of the laser. The ship had energy weapons, and powerful ones at that.

The unknown vessel dove into the atmosphere and pulled back up, changing it's heading directly into the thicket of ships. She was about to order another volley at the ship when she realized she had made a horrible mistake. When she layed out the defense of the planet, she layered the ships and divided them into clusters to form a sort of interlocking shield around the planet. Any ship that tried to break through would be forced to take on an entire section of ships rather than get into one on one combat. She never anticipated a ship that could take on entire clusters at a time. Now that the enemy

ship was approaching her from the side, she would have to fire towards her own forces.

However, Jona realized she had little choice. The enemy ship was charging right towards her. If she didn't order the crew to fire, she might suffer the same fate the captains of the other ships did.

"Fire on the incoming ship!", she ordered.

The bridge crew quickly obeyed. The dreadnought turned until it had a clear shot at the unknown ship and fired a punishing volley of shells from the mass accelerator. She was positive that she had the ship now. Even it couldn't possibly withstand the inevitable impact of so many slugs.

Then the ship opened up some kind of portal and completely disappeared.

"No!", Jona screamed in rage.

The shells that had been intended for the enemy vessel tore into nearby friendlies. They crumpled and transferred a huge amount of kinetic energy into one of the cruisers, completely crippling it.

The portal opened up again on the left side of her ship. The enemy ship exited and the section underneath the nose of the ship began to glow. It was charging up more slowly than the previous attack, which Jona saw as a good time to dodge.

"Evasive maneuvers!", she ordered again.

This time the ship charged forward until it was almost out of Virmire's gravity well. They were extremely lucky as just a second later the energy weapon underneath the nose of the ship completely charged. It unleashed a large beam of blue energy. The stream of energy impaled dozens of ships and vaporized fighters. She watched in horror as the armor of her allies' ships literally boiled away at the intense heat. The upper atmosphere was littered with escape pods filled with crew from the formerly working vessels.

That attack cost her fifteen ships, and it would have cost her far more if the other ships hadn't been smart and fast enough to move out of the way of the beam before it fired. At this rate she was going to have to bring out the Geth reserves early. The enemy fleet had two nigh unstoppable ships.

She pulled up her omni tool and called Tarak.

"Where. are. my. REINFORCEMENTS! We're getting slaughtered!", she shouted before Tarak even had a chance to say anything.

"We're almost there. We are moving at max FTL.", Tarak said.

His words rang hollow in the Eclipse leader's ears.

"Almost isn't enough. We need you now!", She shouted.

The arrival of his fleet in system was Tarak's answer. A perverse

smiled covered Jona's face. Tarak's forces had arrived. Their combined fleets outnumbered the invading Geth ten to one. Even better, the Geth were trapped in the system. It looked like it was their turn to slaughter.

Tarak's fleet of Blue Suns flooded the area with ships and began to move into the system. She was about to celebrate when dozens of huge explosions ripped through the vacuum of space. The mines the Normandy laid had payed off. They waited until plenty of ships were in system and homed in on the center of the fleet. The relief fleet was devastated. Nearly half of their ships had been obliterated by the bombs. Now Tarak was the one in need of reinforcement.

Jona grunted in anger. This was not worth the money Saren paid.

"Fire!", she screamed.

* * *

><p>Miranda smiled as she surveyed the Normandy's handy work. The nuclear minefield worked better than she expected. The mines homed in on the center of the incoming fleet and detonated, wiping out a significant number of the enemy ships. The little trick they pulled earlier forced several ships to break rank. There was a sufficient opening for ground troops to land.<p>

It was not all bright and cheery, however. Despite their advanced technology, the Geth were taking hits. They were extremely outnumbered. Even the dreadnought was starting to have trouble shrugging off hits. The enemy's numbers were doing far more damage than they realized. One on one, the mercenary ships were no match for the superior Geth ships. The enemy commander was apparently smart enough to realize this. They were starting to hunt the Geth ships in packs. Even the Geth could not win in four to one odds. They needed to move onto the next phase quickly.

"Joker, signal the fleet and tell them they're clear. Inform the Geth that they have an opening. Then take us in for another pass.", Miranda said.

Joker nodded and sent the signal.

Several Geth Frigates made break for the planet through the disoriented enemy defenses. It was time to invade the planet.

* * *

><p>Shepard remained stock still on his perch. Everything seemed to be going well, if all the debris falling from the atmosphere was any judge. Unfortunately, he hadn't been the only one to notice. He zoomed in on the surface and kept track of the commotion. Squads of Krogan were leaving their barracks. They were wearing impressive combat hard suits. Most were either carrying an assault rifle or a shotgun that looked so big only a Spartan could carry it. He frowned. These Krogan looked controlled, even disciplined. They would be much tougher to take down than the idiot of a crook he fought on the Citadel.<p>

Another thing concerned him that he hadn't shared with the others.

The satellite scans showed a large area with a wall around it, except there was nothing there. It didn't make any sense. Why would you build such a massive walled off area with nothing in it? At least he didn't have to deal with the Reaper ship. It was on the far side of the planet. It didn't make any sense as to why it wasn't in the fight either. Logically, Saren would have used his most powerful weapons by now. What was he waiting for? Shepard decided to stow it for moment. It was possible he had just gotten lucky. Then again, how often did he have good luck?

The question was seemingly answered by three mass accelerated slugs slamming into the power hubs. The once impenetrable AA grid was down, in addition to dust filling the air and clouding the beautiful sunlight that was shining down only a few seconds earlier. The orbital strike didn't seem to do any damage to surrounding facilities, which was good. He needed to investigate.

However, there were still a few more targets they needed to take down.

"Does everyone have a clear shot at the gate houses?", Shepard said.

He received three green acknowledgement lights from the Spartans he sent with the groups.

"Designate them.", Shepard ordered.

Again, he received three green acknowledgement lights. They were followed by another strike from the Frigates in orbit. The enemy's primary defenses were down. He could have gone after other defenses, but they were so close to the main facility that it might have damaged them. It was too risky. They would have to send in ground forces for the rest.

Shepard sent the signal and hundreds of Geth dropships poured down from the sky. Several merc fighter squadrons descended from orbit and tried to pick off the incoming drop ships. They succeeded in killing a few, but the drop ships were like sand on a seashore. Where one died, two more took it's place.

Geth platforms of all sizes were being offloaded onto the sands. Combat platforms and Primes were taking point while several other units followed close behind. Despite the gatehouse being destroyed, they would still have to travel through the pass to get inside and meet up with their other units which were landing directly inside. Without their support, the inner units would get overwhelmed. They couldn't count on air support since Saren had replaced his impenetrable AA grid with squadrons of fighters coming from orbit. It was imperative that they meet up with the inner units soon.

The Geth army made their way towards the cloud of dust that had once been the southern gatehouse. The force of Primes, Crawlers, Combat Platforms, and countless other Geth marched their way down the pass with all the speed and efficiency one would expect from the machines. Each combat platform was well armed. Most were carrying pulse rifles or plasma shotguns, but Shepard thought he spotted a few carrying what looked like a gatlink machine gun. They were being forced to advanced in a linear formation due to the walls of the pass.

The Geth force looked unstoppable. That is, until the ground began to tremble.

Out of the dust cloud came uncountable legions of Krogan. Their deafening roar filled the sky as they charged toward the mass of Geth with their over sized shotguns blazing. The amount of sand displaced by their stampede muddied the crystal clear waters until they were almost opaque.

An organic force may have been so terrified of this sight that they might have fled, but the Geth did not know fear. It was as foreign a concept to them as humor or romance was. Instead of fleeing at the awesome display of power, they did what any disciplined military force would do. They open fired.

An epic battle in the pass ensued as an unstoppable force met an immovable object. Uncountable numbers of Krogan slammed into the advancing Geth with the force of a rhino. The brute force of a Claymore shotgun at point blank riddled the combat platforms with holes. Geth pulse rifle rounds cut down several of the Krogan before they could do any damage and plasma shotgun blasts heated the air as the super conducting projectiles slammed into Krogan hard suits, flash converting the air into scorching hot plasma. Despite these devastating attacks, the flood of ceramic and flesh continued to move forward.

The battle reminded Shepard of the Battle of Thermopylae fought by the Greeks against the Persians on Earth. The Greeks made a stand in a pass with only a few thousand men against the massive million man strong Persian army. The Persians outnumbered the Greeks tremendously, but were unable to make use of their numbers due to cliffs on one side and the ocean on another. They could only send as many troops to the front line as the pass was wide.

The Geth were facing a similar situation. They outnumbered the Krogan, but their technology was not designed for point blank combat. As strong as their shields were, they would be of little help against a point blank shotgun blast. This was evidenced by the superconductive fluid painting the walls of the pass. The Geth pulled out some kind of hard light blade using their omnitools as a last resort weapon against the Krogans' CQC, but it was an inferior weapon in comparison to the heavy shotguns.

The Geth attempted to move back out of range of the powerful shotguns the Krogan wielded, but it was of no use. The Krogan closed the distance with ease and continued the slaughter. They were using unnecessarily brutal tactics, like ripping the arms off some combat platforms and tossing them into the fray.

This wasn't to say that the Geth weren't making any progress. The Geth Primes were able to slow the advance considerably using their machine guns and rockets, the combat forms were able to fell a few Krogan here and there, and the Colossus was able to blow good sized chunk of the charging Krogan away.

The problem the Geth were facing was the problem any race had when fighting Krogan: There were too many and they were tough to kill. What they lacked in shielding they made up for with their tough hardsuits and robust anatomy. They had backup systems for everything. If the Geth punctured a lung, the Krogan's backup lung would kick in.

This aided their illusion of invincibility.

Shepard knew better. Nothing was invincible. Not Spartans, not ODSTs, not Krogan. They died like any other organism.

Observing the fight taught him several things about these Krogan. First, they would be difficult to kill. Second, they were highly aggressive and as a result didn't think defensively. Third, the carnage of war was what they lived for. There was no reason to use such unnecessary tactics. They could have taken cover in the crater that was once the gatehouse. They didn't need to charge forward and risk casualties.

It did seem to create an interesting situation for the Geth. They technically weren't taking any losses other than equipment since they could easily upload to one of the orbiting ships. However, their main advantage was negated by the Krogan's close quarters tactics. They were being forced into what resembled infantry squares. It was almost like a bayonet charge in the old days.

Shepard was somewhat bewildered at the sight of two space faring races using such archaic tactics. Where was the air support? A quick look up answered that question.

Merc fighter squadrons were engaging the gunships in the upper atmosphere, and they were doing an incredibly good job at it. The Geth weren't receiving any air support because there wasn't any to give. He would have to fix that.

"Everyone, open fire on the Krogan! Let's help out our allies.", Shepard said over the comms.

He received three green acknowledgement lights and a flurry of bullets raining down on the Krogan as an answer. Shepard smiled, but it was to be short lived.

Twenty Mantis gunships were closing in fast, and they weren't friendly. Firing their weapons had revealed their position. Those gunships would be able to take them on. Shepard prepared to call in the the Pelican for aid when the gunships were suddenly destroyed.

Shepard looked up and saw hundreds of dropships and fighters descending from space. They weren't the bulbous insectoid craft the Geth used. No, he'd seen these before. They were more blocky. They were Citadel.

"Shepard, I don't suppose there are any left for us?", said a voice crackling over the comms. It was Victus.

Shepard smiled.

"There is plenty down here. We're just getting started. A little air support would be handy.", Shepard said.

"Coming your way. You'll have the whole army with you soon. Victus out.", the Turian said.

Shepard raised the map and highlighted a location. Then he summoned the Pelican to pick them up.

"We're moving out.", Shepard said.

* * *

><p>Tarak scowled at the sight of the enemy reinforcements arriving in system. He had no idea how the Citadel had found this place, but he knew Garrus had to be involved somehow. A rational being would have decided Saren's money wasn't worth the cost and would have retreated, but this was personal. Garrus had to pay for Omega.<p>

"Fire on those ships and scramble whatever fighters we have!", Tarak shouted.

"But sir, we've lost a good chunk of the fleet and our sensors are down! Many of our ships are limping from the blast! This is suicide!", his Batarian first officer said.

Tarak glared at the soldier.

"I didn't ask for excuses! Now fire the main guns!", Tarak said once more.

This time the crew raised no argument and fired the dreadnought's main guns at the incoming ships, scoring a few hits and disabling a frigate. Several escape pods launched from the craft.

"Wipe out those pods."

The crew obeyed without question and fired the GARDIAN point defense lasers. One by one the escape pods were vaporized. Tarak grunted and activated his omnitool. He typed his orders in on the haptic interface. The remaining ships in his fleet angled themselves and closed in on the new ships, getting into uncomfortably close range. They started shooting at any and all ships they didn't recognize. Most shots missed due to the EMP frying their sensors, but a few made their mark. Despite their small numbers, the point blank blasts from their cannons shattered a group of cruisers and frigates.

Suddenly a dozen rounds slammed into the cruiser beside of them and tore it apart. A few rounds continued on and just barely missed his ship.

"Sensors are back up.", a Turian officer said coolly.

The flagship of the Turian fleet, the Fortress, was firing on them. It was a truly massive ship and it's gun would be more than capable of rending his dreadnought until it was full of holes. Tarak didn't care. It was possible that Garrus was on that ship. It was going to die. He opened up his omnitool and input some commands.

"Fire on their flagship!", Tarak said.

"Are you crazy? That thing is huge! They'll tear us apart if we try to attack!", crackled a Turian voice over the omnitool. It was one of the captains on another ship.

"I didn't ask for opinions. Now attack!", Tarak angrily shouted into his omnitool.

To Tarak's astonishment only a few ships in his fleet were firing at the enemy dreadnought.

"Sir, Captain Darus Rho's cruiser just jumped to FTL. A few other cruisers joined him.", said the Turian officer.

Tarak beat the rail he was standing against in frustration. That coward! To think he had the nerve to betray him in the heat of battle. Tarak focused his big, dark Salarian eyes on the barely working sensors. Once he was done with Garrus, he would deal with Darus's mutiny. Saren would be on his list as well. Where was his monster of a warship, Sovereign? Was he just leaving the him out to die? The Blue Suns would not forget this. Saren was always displaying increasingly odd behavior. He wouldn't even let the merc leaders enter the facility. This job was only worth it because of Garrus.

"Keep up the attack.", he ordered.

"Sir, we won't be able to absorb much more heat with all our weapons firing like this. At this rate, we can only last a few more minutes.", the Batarian said.

"Just do it."

* * *

><p>Victus watched the battle unfold from the CIC on the Fortress like the other commanders did. The Fleet was having little difficulty taking down the remaining ships. The Quarians were running cyber attacks and sensor sweeps to help target the enemy ships. In turn, the Citadel ships targeted them and blew them away. The systematic annihilation was going smoothly for the most part. The Geth had been highly effective despite being outnumbered.<p>

He couldn't believe he was actually saying that. How many times did someone actually outnumber the Geth? Somehow he doubted that they had sent their entire fleet.

Regardless, it was good to have them on his side. Their technology was superior to the rest of the Fleet's, except Shepard's of course. His handy work was obvious. The Normandy seemed to have no trouble handling the enemy, as evidenced by the debris field floating around in the system. It was easy to tell which ships fell victim to the Normandy and which ships fell to conventional fire. Ships that had been sliced in two were scattered across the system, some orbiting one of the inner planets. The Normandy's lasers were a truly magnificent weapon to watch. They sliced dreadnoughts to ribbons with only a few shots at most.

The battle's size was more epic in scale than any other he had fought in. It was getting difficult to command their forces due to the sheer number of ships. At least they managed to get the ground forces in.

"Sir, we're being fired upon by an enemy dreadnought. It has done moderate damage to our port thruster.", an ensign said.

"Bring it on screen.", Victus ordered.

The ensign did as commanded and revealed a sleek gray dreadnought with a huge mass accelerator running the length of the ship. It was obviously of Salarian design. It was uncomfortably close to the Fortress, at what was considered "knife fight range". Then again, with so many ships in system that was difficult to avoid. He noticed a huge Blue Suns logo on the port section of the ship. It had to be the Blue Suns' flagship. It seemed charred on it's sides, a scar from the miraculous survival of the human nuclear minefield. The flagship's burst was a taunt. It was challenging the Fortress to a duel, and Victus was all too happy to oblige them. The flagship almost certainly had Blue Suns leadership on it. If they were foolish enough to challenge the Fortress in a head on fight, then now was the perfect chance to rid the galaxy of their mercenary scum.

"Engage the vessel. I want port turrets and the spinal gun lined up for a shot. How are our shields holding up?", Victus said.

One of the ensigns checked his instruments for a moment then leaned over his chair to face Victus.

"Shields are at 87%. We just got hit with a disruptor torpedo salvo sir.", the ensign reported.

Victus clenched his mandibles. He would have preferred to go into the duel with at least 90% shield strength, but there was no way he could out run the enemy dreadnought long enough for the Fortress's shields to recharge. That was the down side to using heavily armored dreadnoughts. They were very slow in comparison to smaller ships, and the enemy dreadnought was slightly smaller than the Fortress. They also had fighter support. The Fortress's GARDIAN point defense turrets were almost down, and a well placed disruptor torpedo would be enough to cripple the spinal gun if the kinetic barriers went down. The Fortress did carry some fighters of it's own. However, the majority were harassing the enemy's air forces. They wouldn't be able to reach the Fortress in time. He could call in the Normandy. The humans could take on the fighters with ease, but it was imperative that they keep the pressure on the crumbling orbital defences. Maybe there was something they could do anyway.

"Hail the Normandy for me.", Victus ordered.

The Turian communications officer obeyed without question and Miranda's face appeared on a nearby holoscreen.

"General Victus, or is it Admiral.", Miranda said in a mildly condescending tone. Somehow she was more annoying to get along with than Shepard. He ignored the remark and continued.

"I was hoping you could lend some aid. We have enemy fighters swarming us and a dreadnought closing in.", Victus said.

Miranda gave him a brief stare that had an underlying message of _Really? We have bigger fish to fry._

"We can't engage the dreadnought, but we'll take care of the fighters.", she said.

Victus nodded.

"We're grateful.", he said politely.

Seconds later the Normandy unleashed a salvo of ten missiles and sent them flying towards the fighters harassing the Fortress. Victus frowned. Sensors showed that there were about thirty five fighters surrounding the Fortress, and it was probable that at least a quarter of them still had disruptor torpedoes. The Normandy didn't send enough missiles, and he wasn't sure that they would make it in time.

To his surprise, they closed the distance from Virmire's gravity well to the Fortress, which was orbiting the fourth planet, with great speed. Once they reached the small cloud of fighters, the missiles split open and release six large light purple crystals each. Victus was perplexed as he watched the event unfold. What were these things? His question was soon answered as the crystals glowed with a bright light and started to home in on the fighters. The fighters were fast enough to out run them for a while, but once the energy-loaded crystals got just behind them they detonated with a great purple flash. The crystals were in reality two parts. There was the outer crystal and the inner crystal. The outer crystal propelled the crystal and was responsible for homing in on the target. The inner crystal was over charged with energy and would release a powerful explosion once it was near a target. Once it did, the outer crystal would break and result in thousands of pieces of explosive shrapnel that would home in on the enemy's gravity well, no matter how small. This was just the point defense configuration. They could also be programmed to slam into enemy ships in ship to ship combat or explode inches above the ground when used for orbital bombardment, spreading homing shrapnel that would devastate the surrounding landscape. Indeed, the Archer Mark 2 was the natural evolution of missile weapon systems used by the UNSC. The only downside was that only so many could be fit onto a ship, unlike plasma torpedoes which could be created by the ship.

The crystals' explosion destroyed quite a few of the fighters, but those that escaped quickly succumbed to the tiny pieces of crystal shrapnel that homed in on the fighters and detonated on contact. Just like that, the enemy fighter squadrons were no more.

Victus couldn't help but be in awe of the event. With such a weapon, he couldn't help but wonder if fighters were obsolete where the humans came from. Missiles were thought obsolete ages ago due to the advent of the GARDIAN point defense laser system. It could blow most missiles away before they hit the ship. These missiles, however, moved so fast that the only way a GARDIAN could get a lock on them would be sheer luck. The use of such effective point defense would make bombing very difficult, unless you were content to said hundreds of fighters and bomber to the slaughter in droves.

He snapped out of it. He still had a dreadnought to destroy.

"Are we ready?", Victus asked.

"Yes sir. Main gun is lined up with target and port turrets are locked on.", an ensign said.

Victus eyed the sensor data and took a good look at the Blue Suns' ship.

"Open fire."

* * *

><p>Tarak was trying his best to avoid shouting in anger. Normally he was a cool and collected guy. But this battle was getting on his last nerve. Where did the Citadel Fleet get a weapon that could take out so many fighters at once? No matter. He would do this the old fashioned way, with a mass accelerator and a dozen slugs.<p>

"Open fire! Hit them with everything we've got!", Tarak shouted.

The subordinates obeyed him, but they knew that they couldn't keep this up. Things were getting hot inside the ship. They would have to retreat soon, or they were going to die of radiation. None of them envied that fate, but they had been hired to do a job and they would do it. The Blue Suns were founded on discipline. That's why they were a cut above the rest of the mercs. When they were hired, they would do the job no matter what.

The Blue Suns flagship releases a deadly shot from it's spinal gun and managed to drain the Fortress's shields. It was not enough however. The Fortress had superior armor and superior firepower. Concentrated fire from two turrets on the Fortress's side drained it's shields and dented the armor. The spinal gun was not quite so forgiving.

Unable to move out of the way, all Tarak could do was sit and rage about how unfair the galaxy was when the shell fired from the Fortress's main gun slammed into the dreadnought at sufficient velocity. The impact crumpled the shell and transferred all of it's immense kinetic energy into the dreadnought. The sheer force of the blow fractured the ship and shook it apart.

With that shot the Blue Suns' flagship was no more.

* * *

><p>Victus observed the whole thing from the CIC viewscreen. He couldn't say he was proud to kill the crew of that ship. He was never happy when he was forced to take a life. However, he had rid the galaxy of a powerful weapon that was in the hands of mercenaries. It was better that it not exist at all than be in the hands of those who kill for the highest bidder. However, he did honor the opponent's desire to duel as was expected.<p>

He took a look out and surveyed the battle. Things were going the Task Force's way. Slowly but surely the immense numbers of mercenary ships were being destroyed. They desperately tried to hold together by breaking rank and forming packs, but it only delayed the inevitable. All of the Hierarchy's remaining dreadnoughts were here. As were the Salarians and Asari. Between all of the forces in the battle, it was only a matter of time until the orbiting defense fleet fell completely and the Task Force achieved total orbital superiority.

He couldn't believe it. Saren was cornered. They had him right here. They could end this right now. However, one thing did bother him. Where was Sovereign and the Geth ships? He knew Saren still had some. Garrus told him that some of the Heretics escaped. Furthermore, where

was Sovereign? Saren did have a habit of saving his best units for the last, but this was pushing it even for him. The Task Force was right at his doorstep. Any sane commander would have unleashed that behemoth of a ship by now. It was strange indeed.

However, for the time being he was content to simply watch the battle unfold as the Task Force inched towards victory.

* * *

><p>The Pelican moved up to the cliff and the team there jumped on. They repeated the process until everyone was on it. The hatch remained open and Vega continued to take shots at the sea of Krogan on the ground.<p>

Kirrahe grimaced.

"The Krogan situation is worse than we thought. An entire army is down there, and most of our forces haven't even reached the main base. The ones that landed directly inside were wiped out, and we've avoided landing anymore down there. The Geth seem to have followed our example. I have a hunch that Saren is keeping his most skilled forces in reserve.", the Captain said.

Garrus nodded in agreement.

"That sounds like his style. Saren would never send his most powerful units to the front lines until he was certain his weaker units couldn't handle any more punishment. He has a power complex. He enjoys beating his foes with the weakest he has available. It makes him feel more powerful. If these Krogan are the weak units, I don't want to know what his elite forces look like.", he said.

"That explains why he hasn't deployed his gunships or The Sovereign until now, but don't you think he should be near his breaking point? The battle above isn't exactly going in his favor, and his air force is being cut down by the Citadel forces. Power complex or not, he's smart enough to know when to bring out reserves.", Kaidan said.

Shepard silently agreed with them. Something was off about this. Saren's legions of Krogan wouldn't last very long once the Task Force achieved air superiority. Then it would be a simple matter of sending in gunships and mopping up the ground forces. He should have released his more powerful troops by now.

This left several possibilities. The first was that Saren didn't have anything left and was down to his last assets, which Shepard highly doubted. He still had the Sovereign. That alone would pose a significant challenge to the Task Force. He had the means, he just wasn't using them.

The second possibility was that whatever he had left was so horrible that he was hesitant to unleash it for fear of annihilating himself as well as everyone else.

The third was that it was taking time to release and it wasn't ready yet.

The fourth, and most probable reason, was that he was lulling the

Task Force into a false sense of security. He was waiting until the last possible minute to unleash it for maximum psychological impact. This possibility worried Shepard more than the others, because it meant that whatever he had was so powerful that he could be confident it would turn the tide of the battle the minute it was used. It also meant he was able to control it.

More drop ships landed on Virmire to reinforce the area. Asari commandos, Turian soldiers, and Salarian combat engineers scrambled out of the drop ships. Super heated omni gel traversed the battlefield every now and then and slammed into a Krogan soldier. The molten charge melted armor and burned tissue, allowing soldiers with incendiary rounds to finish the job. Snipers occasionally let off a shot or two, felling many Krogan officers who were too dumb to get out of the way. Some Krogan were being tossed around like a rag doll by Asari commandos. Others were caught up in the small singularities spawned by increase a point's mass until it was infinite. These soldiers floated helplessly and were easy pickings for the Task Force troops. Gunships peppered the Krogan from above. and Mako tanks were being dropped to take care of some of the more fortified enemy emplacements. The combined forces were pushing the Krogan back towards the facility in the center where the three passes converged.

Shepard checked his VISR display again. They were landing in the area the passes converged in just outside of Saren's base. The battle raging outside would allow the team to covertly search the facility.

"Listen up. You all know what we're here for. The primary objective is to find and kill Saren. Secondary objectives include recovering data on the Genophage cure and any experiments he's been up to in that base. Legion, I want you up top. Cover us the best you can with your sniper rifle. Spartans, your objective is to locate and extract EDI. STG, it will be your job to recover whatever intel he may have. We have to make sure this doesn't go any further than this battle. Make sure he has no insurance plans. Garrus, you and I are going to kill Saren. You have your orders. Let's get inside.", Shepard said.

He looked down at the battle raging below. The combined forces or the Turians, Salarians, Asari, and Geth were in a giant battle of attrition against the wall of muscle that was the Krogan army. It wouldn't cost them to lend a hand. He set the Pelican to turn around so it's hatch faced the facility. This would give them a good shot at the enemy positions.

He handed Vega a plasma grenade.

"Mind giving them a hand before we go in?", Shepard asked.

Vega smiled beneath his helmet. He took the plasma grenade and chucked it towards a group of Krogan that were hunkered down behind cover. The grenade blew just as it hit the ground and fried the Krogan, completely boiling away their armor and scorching their flesh with intense heat. The Task Force soldier exploited this gap in their line and advanced.

For all the might of the Krogan army, they could not stand up to the combination of Turian discipline, Asari Commando biotics, the

technical skill of the Salarians, and the technology of the Geth. They were being beaten back. In a few moments Saren would either have an army at his doorstep.

Suddenly, the troops below were being bombarded. Shepard couldn't see the source of the blast but he could easily see the results. Sections of the ground where Task Force soldiers once stood were scorched to the point of becoming the smooth glass. There was only one weapon that he knew of that possessed that power, and he was the only one that possessed it.

That is, unless...

Shepard's blood chilled. They couldn't be here, could they?

Another glowing blob launched over the wall and vaporized one of the Task Force's Mako tanks. It was plasma. Only one other race had plasma.

His worst fears were confirmed as the familiar scream of Banshees filled the air. They opened up with their plasma guns and fuel rod cannons, utterly decimating entire positions of Task Force soldiers. Seraph fighters streaked through the air and rapidly took back the sky from the Task Force.

The effect wasn't lost on the others. The Spartans solemnly watched friendly gunships boil away from the plasma. Garrus's jaw clenched at the sight while Padok's jaw dropped.

The comms were flooded with the screams of allies behind burned away by an enemy they had never seen before.

"What is that?!", shouted a random soldier over the comms just before a strafing run killed him.

Shepard now realized what the empty area was for.

Three ships uncloaked, and none of them were native to this galaxy. To the left and right were smooth purple ships that looked as if they were metal sea creatures. To the center was a massive bulbous ship made of a purple alloy. Two small fins jutted out from the head of the ship and it's main body looked similar to a manta ray.

The ships were all too familiar to the Spartans.

They were Corvettes and one CCS-Battlecruiser. Banshees and Seraphs continued to pour out of the cruiser like water out of a spring and the Corvettes open fired with their plasma cannons again.

Shepard scowled at the sight and scolded himself for not noticing it before. It all made sense. There was only one way the Heretics could have gotten slipspace outside of them getting a hold of the Normandy's designs, which they couldn't have gotten. There was only one other species with access to the Transgalactic Relay. These ships were only proof of what he should have suspected all along.

The Sangheili were in this galaxy, and they were not on Citadel Space's side.

* * *

><p>Author's Note

****I'm sorry for the long delay everyone. It takes a lot of time to write a 32,000 word chapter. Anyways, what many of you suspected is true. The Sangheili do indeed have a presence in the galaxy, but it's not what you expect. I'll give you a hint: It has to do with Halo 4. I know it's taken a long time but Halo is finally getting a little more involved in the events.****

****We'll finish up the Battle of Virmire next chapter, and after that I'm going to start on the Halo arc. That's right, a few chapters placed in the Halo galaxy. They will act as an interquel of sorts, explaining what has been going on in the Haloverse while Shepard has been off adventuring. There is a reason for Saren holding back his Sangheili and Heretic forces. There is also a reason for Sovereign not showing up. All will be explained next chapter.****

****Until then.****

19. Battle of Virmire, Part 2: Revelations

****Disclaimer: I do not own Halo or Mass Effect. They belong to their respective owners. This work is nonprofit.****

* * *

><p>The crew of the Pelican watched in horror as the might of the Sangheili was deployed on the battlefield. Task Force troops were slaughtered in droves as Banshees blanketed the battlefield with plasma so hot it turned the ground to glass on contact. Wraith tanks were exiting the facility and further bombarding the allied forces. Finally having gotten over the initial shock, squadrons of friendly gunships targeted the Wraith tanks. They let loose their missiles and hammered the enemy positions with rapid fire mass accelerator fire. They succeeded in killing some of the Krogan and a few Wraiths, but it was a pyrrhic victory. Tear-drop shaped Seraph fighters wiped them out of the sky with rapid fire plasma cannons, then streaked upwards.<p>

Shepard activated the Pelican's cloak to prevent the Banshees from finding them. They couldn't afford to be spotted now. The Pelican could maybe battle a few Banshees, but it was no match for a Seraph.

The ground troops temporarily regrouped around the remaining Makos and managed to use the main cannon to significantly injured two of the Wraiths. However, the Makos were quickly wiped out by a squadron of Banshees. Fuel rod cannons continued to hammer enemy positions and friendly fighters were taken out by plasma cannons.

That was when the Battle Cruiser began deploying it's Phantom dropships. They fired their plasma cannons and wiped out even more friendly troops, then dropped complements of Sangheili, Kig-Yar, and Uggnoy. Golden armored Sangheili elites activated their energy swords and pointed them towards the Task Force lines. Having received their orders, squads of Sangheili Minors, Uggnoy, and Kig Yar marched forward with periodic shots from some kind of new plasma rifle and pistol fire. The Sangheili tossed plasma grenades with precision

accuracy. Blue explosions peppered the battlefield as troops got stuck with purple plasma grenades. They tried in vain to pull them off.

The Krogan forces roared in triumph and used their new reinforcements' momentum. They charged forward with their shotguns blazing and trampled over some Unggoy in their haste. The unstoppable charge crashed into friendly cover positions and slaughtered them with point blank shotgun blasts.

The amazingly defiant Task Force troops would not go down so easily. Despite the hail of plasma grenades and charging Krogan, the valiant troops fought on. A flurry of biotic explosions covered the war torn rift between the Task Force front lines and Saren's base. Molten omni gel and electrical charges stopped some charging Krogan in their tracks. Turian fragmentation grenades spread tiny blades of shrapnel that tore into the approaching Unggoy. The Task Force was fighting back.

However, Shepard knew how this fight was going to go. The Sangheili were similar to a glass cannon. While their defensive capabilities were usually inferior, they had amazingly fast offense and usually had weapons more powerful than anything else on the battlefield. The ground engagement was just a distraction. Any minute the Seraphs would wipe the last friendly fighter from the sky and simply drop plasma charges until there wasn't a single Task Force soldier left on the planet. They had no choice but to retreat into space and start striking from orbit. At least in space they outnumbered the CCS Battle Cruiser and the Corvettes. Down here they would just get slaughtered.

This also meant he didn't have much more time to find Saren. They had to act quickly, or there would be no escape.

"Shepard, what is going on down there? We're losing troops left and right. I've heard reports of a strange split jawed alien race attacking us with some kind of energy weapons.", Victus said over the comms.

Shepard's took a deep breath.

"Listen to me. You might have been able to beat them with your ground forces, but they're about to control the skies and there is nothing you can do. Once that happens, they will press their advantage and wipe every soldier you've got out. Pull your troops back and wait for the enemy ships to come to you. Once they get into orbit, get every weapon you have and target those ships. Keep firing at them until you are sure they're dead. You'll get slaughtered if you try to keep fighting on the ground.", Shepard said over the comms.

Victus paused for a moment.

"Very well. We'll start pulling out now. You need to come too.", he said.

Shepard took a deep breath.

"Negative. I still have a mission to complete.", he said.

"Shepard, you do realize going in without the army behind you is

suicide? Who knows what Saren has behind those walls!", Victus pleaded.

Shepard clenched his teeth at those words. The unsuspecting citizens of this galaxy had no idea of what they were getting into. He remembered the Covenant War and the damage it had done. Planets once full of life were heated by the energy projectors until they were barren glasslands. Millions died in a pointless war of extermination. If the Sangheili had a presence in this galaxy, he needed to know how many there were. He had to get that data back to the Normandy and get it to HIGHCOM. Things had changed. If he couldn't stop them here, the Sangheili could potentially slaughter hundreds of worlds before being stopped. No, he couldn't retreat now.

"I know exactly what is behind those walls, and I know that you're all as good as dead if I don't stop them. Goodbye Victus.", Shepard said and closed the channel.

Shepard was somewhat relieved that Victus had listened to him. The entire Task Force army was retreating back to their dropships, ready to reach the safety of their ships. Unfortunately for them a sea of Krogan were happy to follow them all the way there. Squadron after squadron of Seraph fighters flew up into the upper atmosphere, and Shepard had some idea what they were going to do. The Task Force's fighters were much faster than the Seraphs, but how many were left to stop the deadly tear drop shaped crafts? There was no way a ship from this galaxy could withstand a solid hit from one of their plasma charges. Destroying the Sangheili's offensive capabilities was number one priority.

But Victus was right. This was suicide. The probability of anyone coming back alive was slim at best.

Shepard looked at his team as they sat, dismayed at seeing their allies run. His mind flashed back to Torfan. He lost too many that day. He couldn't allow that again.

The Pelican was just over Saren's base.

"Listen everybody.", Shepard said through his speakers in a somewhat melancholy tone.

Everyone turned to his attention.

"This is the end of the road. There is only one way out of this.", Shepard said.

He opened up the floorboard and found a locked compartment with a keypad on it. He typed in a code and pulled out a capsule about the size of a suitcase. It had a handle on the top and a keypad on it as well. Garrus and the Spartans recognized immediately what it was. Shepard just got out a nuke.

"This is it for me. I'm the best shot at destroying that cruiser. I'm going to take this nuke into the Battle Cruiser and set it off. As long as it's shields are down, the resulting explosion should be enough to destroy it and take the base with it. I'll have the Pelican take you back to the Normandy.", Shepard said.

Ashley grabbed his arm as he was about to jump.

"Pardon the insubordination, sir, but I won't let you do this.", she said.

Garrus nodded as well.

"Where you go, I go.", he said.

Shepard looked at Vega.

"Hey, loco. We can do this. Saren has never seen the likes of Commander Shepard. Besides, I've been meaning to teach the hinge heads some manners since Feh1 Prime. I'm not going to give up now.", he said.

"Count me in.", Kaidan said.

Garrus looked at the STG. Kirrahe paused for a moment.

"I suppose we're in as well.", he said.

"Indeed. Come this far. Can't turn back now.", Mordin said.

"We would like to aid you.", Legion said over the comms.

Shepard looked at everyone in the Pelican. They didn't truly realize what was about to be done. There was a good chance none of them were going to come out of this alive. Then again, he told them that before they joined the mission. They followed him when they went into Heretic Station as well. Now, they were ready to walk into hell with him side by side. He couldn't ask for a better team. If they wanted to come, then they could come. They had made it this far. Maybe they could pull off another miracle.

"If you're coming with me, then you need to be briefed. The Spartans already know this and it's a long story, so I'll give you the quick version. The aliens down there are a race called the Sangheili. They fought a genocidal war against my species. They're a fierce warrior society. Nearly all of their weapons use high intensity plasma as their main method of attack. Your kinetic barriers will be useless, so be careful. Also be warned that they are scary fast. They can evade attacks that you would think they shouldn't have been able to dodge. They'll strafe as they fire and they enjoy close quarters combat. The tiny aliens sometimes commit suicide bomb attacks.. The other aliens use shield gauntlets. That's everything for now.", Shepard explained.

The Salarrians were somewhat shocked at the mention that the new aliens were a race of genocidal warriors. They already had trouble with the Krogan. Having another version of the Krogan to fight was the last thing they were careful to pay attention to Shepard's explanation of their combat abilities. Kirrahe grimaced at the fact that their kinetic barriers wouldn't stop their weapons. That would complicate things. The STG operatives were trained to not rely on their shields, but knowing they could stop a lucky enemy shot was a small comfort. They would do no such thing against the searing heat of plasma.

"We'll go in together. Legion, I'll send the Pelican to get you. You be overwatch. We'll figure out how to get the nuke onto that Battle

Cruiser when the time comes. Everyone got it?", Shepard said.

Everyone nodded.

"Good. Get ready to move."

* * *

><p>Victus and the other leaders listened to the comms chatter as the battle continued. Shepard sounded as if the end of the world had just appeared. Judging by the reports they were hearing from the ground, he very well could be right. More than half the invasion force was gone. This was an enemy they had never seen before. These energy weapons were tearing them apart. They had zero defense against this enemy's new weaponry. It was taking time they didn't have for the ground forces to reach the dropship. Squad after squad was being glassed from above, and there was little that could be done about it.<p>

He had already sent what fighters and gunships he had left to cover the ground escape, however it wasn't doing much good. Most remaining air forces were either being cut down in atmosphere by enemy frigates or tangled up in action over the planet. The alien ship was deploying a vast amount of tear drop shaped fighters that carried powerful weaponry. Plasma cannons were shredding Task Force ships to pieces.

Victus gritted his teeth. He could already see how this was going to play out. The newcomers fighters weren't as fast as his fighters, but there were more of them and their weapons were obscenely powerful. More than one of the friendly ships had been annihilated by their energy weapons. Most friendly fighters were out of commission and the Fortress's GARDIAN turrets were already down. They were near defenseless against these things, and they would soon be coming after the ships.

"All ships, regroup around the Flagships Destiny Ascension, Fortress, Geth Dreadnought, and the Live Ships. Form an overlapping grid so our remaining GARDIAN turrets can get a clear shot at the enemy fighters.", he ordered.

The ships followed orders the best they could, but the enemy fighters were relentless. A squadron of the tear drop fighters approached a retreating ship and dropped balls of blue energy onto it. The energy charges impacted the hull of the ship and boiled it away. It was dead in the water. The fighters strafed the ship and cut it to pieces. There was nothing he could do about it now.

A portion of the Quarian vessels were breaking off and jumping to FTL. Victus opened a comm channel to the Quarians with his omnitool, and they came on screen.

"What are you doing? The battle isn't over yet.", Victus said sternly.

Admiral Raan came on screen.

"I'm sorry, Adrien. We cannot risk what is left of our people to finish this fight. We will leave the Heavy Fleet with you. They

represent all of our military forces. However, the life ships and the civilian fleet must retreat.", she said.

Victus sighed. Now was not the time for his forces to scatter. Without the Quarian fleet, the already slim odds of beating their new foe would dwindle. Most dreadnoughts were still intact, but in truth a good portion of the fleet was overheating from the massive slugging match between the two fleets. Most of them would probably have to cool off before they could fire their weapons again. He needed every ship he could get. On the other hand, he understood their predicament. The entire Quarian race was on those ships. It was a brave thing just fighting for how long they did, and perhaps braver still to leave what was left of their military to finish the fight.

"Very well then. It has been an honor serving with you. If we survive this fight, we'll join you.", Victus said.

"Thank you.", Raan said.

Hundreds of Quarian ships jumped to FTL, eager to escape from the coming slaughter. Deep down, he knew they were right. They had more to lose than anyone. He would have to carry on without them.

"Victus, what is going on? I just saw a half of the entire Quarian fleet retreat!", asked Fedorian as he entered the CIC.

"They're removing the civilian fleet from battle. We'll have to take them on our own.", Victus replied.

Fedorian flashed a look of reserved rage. He knew that they couldn't trust the Quarrians to hold on. They were thin skinned vagrants, and they would pay for their cowardice. However, he could not afford to express his anger at the moment. Things were bad enough without the Quarrians leaving. He calmly marched out of the nearest door.

Victus did his best to stay focused on the battle. He knew Fedorian would cause trouble for the Quarrians after this. Galactic politics were already bad enough. He couldn't afford for this to go any further. Between the discontent citizens, the waning power of the Council, the war, and the arrival of these newcomers, the galaxy was going to need strong leadership.

That would have to wait, however. There were more immediate problems at the moment. What was left of the fleet had followed his orders. Everyone was packed into a tightly knit formation. The fresher, more combat-ready ships formed a bubble around the battle torn warships that had been gunning down the now barely functioning enemy fleet. At least that had gone according to plan. The merc fleet was in shambles. Most freelancer mercs fled once they realized that fighting the Task Force wasn't worth the money. The rest were composed of the three major merc organizations, and all the major command ships seem to have been destroyed bar the Eclipse flagship that was holding on for dear life. The enemy fleet was in complete disarray. Under any other circumstances, he would call this a victory.

However, Saren's strategy was more elaborate than he first expected. He should have seen it coming. Saren was too smart to use something like mercs to make up his army. He wouldn't use something he couldn't

easily control for anything this important. He must have known that some of the mercs were going to run away, but he also would have known that enough would stick around and fight. They weren't great warriors because they didn't need to be. The entire purpose of using the mercs was to wear the Task Force ships down. Now that most Task Force ships were overheating and most point defense systems were down, he could call in the heavy hitters. They could last for a little while longer, but he knew the odds of beating ships with weapons like the Normandy were very slim.

The only other option was to retreat. Most ships still had working FTL drives. If they fell back, then they might be able to escape the wrath of these aliens. Thus far only fighter bombers had been deployed, but he knew there were three actual ships on the surface. They wouldn't stay there forever. If they were even remotely as powerful as the Normandy, then it was probable no one would survive the attack.

The strategist in him told him it was time to retreat and live to fight another day, but the passionate warrior in him said otherwise. None of the dropships carrying the ground troops had returned yet, and thanks to the new formation they would have a farther distance to go. He couldn't leave them behind.

Unless he already did by recalling all fighters. He had to hope the shuttles were fast enough to outrun the enemy fighters. He couldn't afford for his remaining fighters to leave. Protecting the remaining ships from the incoming fighters was crucial.

Then again, the retreating troops represented the vast majority of the Citadel Space's ground forces. If they all died, there wouldn't be an army left. Without one, catching Saren would be nearly impossible. Furthermore, if Saren escaped here it could be ages before he gets found again. They couldn't retreat. It had to end here.

However, one thing was certain. They needed a miracle.

* * *

><p>Miranda sat in a chair on the bridge of the Normandy. She was just as concerned as everyone else, if not more. The Sangheili's presence was unsettling. Barring the Sovereign, they were the only ones in the entire galaxy that could match the Normandy's power. It was imperative that they get destroyed as soon as possible.<p>

That was not the most disturbing thing about their presence. What was the worst aspect of this revelation was the revelation itself. Their fighting Citadel Space, which she was loath to admit were allies of the Alliance, was a powder keg waiting to blow. The fact that the Normandy was fighting them was grounds for a declaration of war. What reason did they have for deploying a Battle Cruiser? Why did they come here at all? The Illusive Man was certain that they would not use the Relay for fear of it being a Pandora's box like Halo. Even if they did, ONI would know. The Illusive Man would have told her so.

The only possibility was that it had been activated before ONI knew of its existence. That still didn't make sense. Who would have known about it? The Sangheili surely didn't have it in their possession

very long before ONI discovered it as well. Either way, this was not good.

"Sir, the ally shuttles are escaping into the outer atmosphere and they're being chased by Seraphs. Orders?", Joker asked.

Miranda bit her lip. If she ordered an attack on the Seraphs, then she may be responsible for firing the first shots in a new war. She didn't want to be responsible for that. Then again, it looked as if the Sangheili had already made up their mind. She couldn't afford to sit idly by and let everyone else get slaughtered, because she had no doubt that the Sangheili wouldn't ignore the Normandy for long. There was a CSS Battle Cruiser and two Corvettes down there, and together they packed an immense amount of firepower. It was also possible that they could track the Normandy's slipspace wake should they try to retreat. The Normandy could take on both Corvettes and win, but a CCS Battle Cruiser? That kind of ship had enough firepower to glass a planet. They needed all the help they could get.

Furthermore, there was still Sovereign to consider. It had stayed out of the fight thus far, but there was no guarantee that it would stay that way. She knew where it was. For whatever reason, Saren had it parked on the darkside of the planet. Earlier in the battle she considered attacking it while it was on the ground, but quickly dismissed the idea. Just because the ship was on the ground didn't mean it was defenseless. Attacking it might force it into the fight. No sense in waking sleeping giants. Now, however, she definitely couldn't afford to attack. Normandy couldn't fight both Sangheili Corvettes, a CCS Battle Cruiser and the Sovereign. It was best to leave that ship alone.

As for the others, it was too late. The Normandy and by extension the Alliance was part of this war now. She had no choice but to attack the Sangheili. Some Seraph fighters were already slipping past. It was now or never.

"Joker, bring us on an attack pattern and ready the missiles. We're going to cover the retreat. Target all incoming Seraphs. Victus and the others will have to deal with the ones who got by us.", Miranda said.

"Aye.", Joker acknowledged.

The Normandy moved in on an attack pattern, ready to try and stop the tide of Seraph fighters. Of course, it was more like a tsunami. All the Task Force shuttles suddenly came screaming into outer space in a mad dash to the safety of the allied Fleet. They weren't alone. Seraph after Seraph came after the retreating shuttles, annihilating a few with plasma strafing. The shuttles were completely defenseless against them. No fighters could be spared, especially with the incoming Seraphs attacking the fleet. The Normandy was their only chance.

The Normandy moved into position and closed its hangar in case someone got the bright idea to board the ship. Then several points of red light flickered to life on the wings of the ship. The pulse lasers fired and took out several enemy fighters as the flood of dropships flew past them. The pulse lasers charged up and fired again, this time annihilating even more Seraphs. It kept this up, firing the pulse lasers in rapid succession and destroying any Seraph

that was chasing a dropship. However, this wasn't enough. More were coming.

The Normandy fired twenty missiles at the incoming clouds of fighters. As expected, the missiles broke open and unleashed a pod full of energized crystals who began seeking their targets. Most dropships were now behind them, so there was little chance of one of the missiles attacking them. The crystals locked on to their targets and lunged towards them.

Seraph fighters were fast by UNSC standards, much faster than Longswords. However, they were not as fast as mass effect field enabled fighters that could decrease their mass and move more quickly. If the crystals could catch those, they could catch the Seraphs.

The Seraphs knew this and broke formation. They tried to kite the crystal explosive in vain hope that it might stop chasing them. This only delayed the inevitable. The overloaded crystals detonated one by one near the fighters. Most were taken out by the initial explosion, but the rest were quickly destroyed by the homing shrapnel. The fighters had been destroyed, for the time being.

The respite was a brief one. More Seraphs ascended from the planet. The odds were stacked against the fleet if even a few squadrons got past the Normandy. If the entire fighter wing made it through, it would be a simple matter of out running the Fleet's exhausted point defense and what fighters had survived the onslaught. The Normandy was all that stood between the Fleet and total annihilation by plasma bombardment.

"Prepare for another pass. It's not over yet.", Miranda said.

Joker nodded and readied the Normandy for the coming storm of fighters. It was going to be a long battle.

* * *

><p>Victus stared at the holographic screens available in the CIC. What few fighters managed to slip by Miranda were on their way towards the bubble of frigates and cruisers built around the dreadnoughts. This formation would make for the best anti-fighter screen. All of the exhausted ships with shot GARDIAN lasers or were too hot to keep fighting were in the center of the bubble. They would be most protected, while the ships with still functioning point defense systems would be on the outside. The situation was not totally hopeless. The number of still-functioning GARDIAN turrets was far less than what they had originally entered battle with, but GARDIAN lasers were very strong and incredibly accurate. The odds of one of those fighters surviving an encounter with one were not high.<p>

They were coming anyway. Fortunately, there were only a few of them. The sensor detected about twenty or so. The Normandy was thankfully holding the rest of them back with it's nigh-perfect point defense system.

"Sir, the enemy fighters will be within range in eighteen seconds.", an ensign said.

Victus nodded.

"Let them come.", he said.

The ensign turned back to his monitor screen. Victus knew they were nervous. Even the finest soldier would fear an enemy that you know next to nothing about. Fear of the unknown was inherent in all species. Some dealt with this by seeking out the unknown and confronting it. This time, however, it appeared as if they unknown had found them. At the moment, however, he was more worried about what kind of firepower the unknown was carrying.

Eighteen seconds passed quickly and the fighters were in range. The Seraphs fired first, boiling away large pieces of armor in one of the outer cruisers. The fighters then moved in on a bombing run. They did not realize they were running directly into the line of remaining GARDIAN turrets. The GARDIANs open fired with pinpoint accuracy. The attack was devastating on the Seraphs. Seventeen out of twenty were destroyed by the high powered point defense lasers. The crew smiled in relief. The new enemy was not invincible. They could be beaten.

The remaining three fighters moved back into formation and reminded the Fleet they were still alive by going on a strafing run. They charged directly towards a cruiser with their heavy plasma cannons blazing. At first glance it appeared as if they were on a collision course, but on closer inspection it was clear what they were doing. The sheer power of their energy weapons was shown as the plasma continued to scorch the ship as they dived towards it. They were tunneling a hole in the ship by boiling away each deck. It was a risky maneuver. If they did not succeed in tunneling all the way through the ship by the time they reached the hole, they would crash.

It was also a tactically brilliant move. The Seraphs were well aware of the Fleet's excellent point defense capabilities now. The cruiser, however, had none left. Those who were around it were reluctant to fire for fear of hitting the cruiser itself. If the point defense system had been at 100% capacity, this wouldn't have been a problem. However, all ships in range did not have their GARDIAN grids at 100%. This was the fatal flaw of the GARDIAN system. They were nearly unstoppable in early stages of the battle, even achieving 100% accuracy. The problem came later in battle. Lasers overheated as they were used, and if the crew wasn't careful they would burn out.

In truth, most of the Fleet's GARDIAN turrets were still working. They simply couldn't afford to fire them. Most ships were already nearing their heat limit due to prolonged battle with the merc ships, and using GARDIANs produced heat just like any other weapon. Using them would further increase the already uncomfortable temperature in the ships. Only those ships kept in reserve could still afford to fire them.

Now that wasn't an option. The Seraphs were far too close to be accurately targeted. The only other option was interceptors. They were already on their way to the cruiser. Victus had no doubt the they could wipe out the remaining Seraphs.

The Seraphs moved into a linear formation and the forward fighter kept hammering the tunnel with their heavy plasma cannons. The

intense heat finished carving a tunnel through the ship and they flew through in a line. The last Seraph in formation left a plasma charge behind in the heart of the ship. This was the killing blow for the cruiser. Its armor had already been boiled away for the most part by the strafing runs. It couldn't take a plasma charge in the heart of the ship. It blew apart into multiple molten pieces of metal.

This wasn't the worst thing, however. The enemy fighters had broken into the sphere. Most GARDIAN turrets were facing outwards rather than inwards, and the ones that were ran the risk of hitting other ships. Fortunately, the remaining fighters were already intercepting the incoming Seraphs. A bitter dogfight broke out as the Seraphs turned to face the fighters. Mass accelerators and plasma cannons brightened the dark vacuum as the fighters strafed each other. Despite there only being three Seraphs, the Sangheili fought with great tenacity. They landed a few glancing blows on two Turian fighters. Under normal circumstances, this would only cripple them. Plasma was much deadlier than a mass accelerated round, however. The two fighters vaporized on contact.

The kills did nothing to stave off the inevitable defeat. Mass accelerated rounds smacked into the Seraph fighters as the Turians closed in on their six. They were slightly more resilient to them than the average fighter, but the concentrated fire was too heavy. Speed, not armor, was the key to survival in a dogfight. The Turian fighters were better in this aspect. One by one the Seraphs were destroyed.

Victus breathed a sigh of relief. That could have gone much worse than it did. It still cost the lives of those brave men and women on the cruiser and those courageous pilots, but it could have been far worse. Furthermore, he knew what the enemy fighters' weakness was. They were tough and they wielded powerful energy weapons, but they weren't fast enough to outrun his fighters. He could use that. However, he also knew this was far from over. The Fleet was already battle weary and many ships were out of commission. He was proud of his troops. They fought hard.

It was too soon to quit, however. They had to hold out a little longer. The battle had only just begun.

* * *

><p>The Pelican landed on a small stream between two cliffs. The sun was setting in the horizon. According to the map, this was as close to a back door as they were going to get. The hatch opened up and Vega took point as they got out and into the estuary's crystal clear water. Once he made sure everything was clear, he waved everyone else out. The Spartans exited first, followed by Garrus and the STG. They tucked the butt of their weapons firmly into their shoulders and slowly scanned the terrain as they walked. Morlin involuntarily gulped. This was the most dangerous thing the STG team had ever done. Not even Tuchanka was this dangerous. Here, not even their shields would protect them.<p>

A massive shadow was cast over the entire facility. It was a side effect of the huge Battle Cruiser above them. Garrus couldn't help but wonder how a ship that big was even in the atmosphere, let alone so close to the surface. It was the size of a dreadnought at the very least. Normally, a ship would require a tremendous amount of element

zero for it to work. Then he recalled that this is the race that nearly drove the Humans, the most powerful race he knew, to extinction. If they were invading this galaxy, what chance did his people have? Shepard said that those ships could easily glass entire worlds in sufficient numbers. He had seen the Normandy in action. If these ships were even remotely close to it in combat power, the fleet would get sliced to ribbons. Their only chance was to take them out from the ground.

"This is our last chance to stock up on supplies, so speak up now if you want anything.", Shepard said.

"I need my shotgun. It's going to be close quarters once we get inside that base.", Ashley said.

"I'm going to need a plasma machine gun. I want to glass some Elites.", Vega said.

Shepard looked at Kaidan, who shook his head. Shepard checked his equipment. He had sufficient ammo and supplies. There was no need for anymore and there was little time to waste. He called the Normandy over slipspace comms.

"This is Commander Shepard. I need an equipment drop my coordinates.", Shepard said.

Then he sent a message detailing everything he required. Sometimes you just couldn't fit everything into a Pelican. That is where orbital weapon drops were supposed to come into play. It wasn't always practical when in the middle of a firefight, but there was no quicker way to resupply units on the ground. It was especially useful for Spartans, since the odds of actually coming across a supply depot while on a mission were essentially zero.

"Supply drop on the way.", Joker's voice said over the comms.

In high orbit, the Normandy was continuing to hold off the flood of Seraph fighters coming up from the surface of the planet. A CSS Battlecruiser wasn't a carrier by a longshot, but they still carried a huge amount of fighters. This one seemed to carry more than usual. Despite the oncoming storm of Seraphs, the Normandy's excellent point defenses kept them at bay just long enough to fire two small pods. They were each just large enough to carry their cargo and filled with a shock absorbing foam so that their contents wouldn't be in a billion pieces once it hit the two pods fell to the surface of the planet undetected, their heat shielding preventing them from burning up in Virmire's atmosphere.

The twin pods fell just a few meters away from the Spartans and aliens, the cases popping open on impact. Two weapons, just as expected. Ashley walked over and grabbed her shotgun and a few spare magazines of shotgun shells. Vega grabbed the plasma SAW. The plasma SAW was smaller and more compact than the one he typically used in training and as a result didn't have as good heat management. There was no way to send the an entire plasma turret down. On the upside, the SAW-P would allow for much better mobility since in the hands of a Spartan it could be wielded more like an assault rifle rather than the light machinegun it actually was.

"Now that we're all geared up, let's move out. Legion, I'm sending

the Pelican to your position. It will take you wherever you need. Don't deactivate its cloak unless absolutely necessary. Those Seraphs can destroy it. It's our best way out of here.", Shepard said.

"Affirmative.", Legion confirmed.

Shepard took a good look at everyone. Their weapons were drawn and they were ready for action. It was time to go.

"Move out. I'll take point.", Shepard said.

The team formed up with the Spartans up front and the aliens behind them. Garrus's shields would be able to stand up to the plasma, but if one of the STG members got hit they would be in deep trouble. They inched their way through the stream until they reached a point where several rocks jutted out from the cliffs at a normal human's waist height. A small waterfall was calmly letting gravity pull it down into the clear waters below. There was a beach ahead, and in the distance stood Saren's base. Several moss covered boulders covered the beach and obscured any possible trap that could lie ahead.

"Wait here. I'll scout ahead. STG, Garrus, you follow the Spartans' lead.", Shepard said over the comms.

He received three green flashes on his VISR display system from the Spartans. He cloaked his black and crimson armor with active camo and crouch walked onto the beach, his footsteps artificially dampened by his armor. He drew the silenced pistol Falls had made him and unsheathed his twelve inch monomolecular combat knife, crossing the knife arm over his left arm which was holding the pistol. The stance was typically used by special forces when they needed to hold both their knife and their gun, which allowed them to manage recoil at the same time. That was a non-issue for Spartans due to superhuman strength and reaction times, but it was still a convenient stance for stealth kills. If there was someone on this beach, they would have to be killed quickly and quietly.

He activated his Spartan Vision on his VISR and scanned the surrounding area with his sensors. Nothing was showing up on the motion sensor, but through his Spartan Vision two figures were highlighted in a bright orange glow. They weren't tall like Sangheili, nor were they as bulky as Krogan. The silhouettes were small and triangular. He recognized them. Unggoy, or Grunts as they were often called by the UNSC troops. They were little more than cannon fodder or slaves for the Sangheili. It puzzled him. Intel was scarce on the subject, but as far he knew the Sangheili stopped using them in combat roles after the Great War. The hinge heads seemed to figure out that it was a waste of supplies and a misappropriation of manpower to actually use the pathetic creatures in combat. Who knows just how much equipment was lost during the war due to the Grunt's stupidity. They were better off arming troops with fighting ability than wasting weapons on creatures who would get easily slaughtered against the might of the UNSC's weaponry. Their presence made no sense. It was worth an investigation, if he had the time.

He flashed a red warning light three times which appeared on the other Spartans' VISRs. It was the signal for "Hostile spotted ahead." Shepard eased his way towards the Grunts. They weren't wearing their typical breath mask. Instead, they had tubes feeding the methane

stored in their pack into their nostrils. They were armed only with plasma pistols. Shepard's first inclination was to take a them out with a headshot. Then he realized the problem with this plan. It would be a waste of valuable bullets. He would have to kill them some other way.

The small projectile launcher he had installed on his left gauntlet would do the trick, so long as his armor's upgrades hadn't caused it to malfunction. The launcher wasn't standard on MJOLNIR armor. He had it built to aid in stealth missions. It could be used for a variety of things, from tracking targets to causing distractions when killing the opponent would be inconvenient. The major flaw was that it fired specially made darts that pushed microtechnology to the limit. They had to be small, or else they would be spotted. He only procured a few every mission. They were already loaded into the gauntlet. It was probably better to save them. No sense in wasting them on grunts.

Shepard checked the surroundings once more to ensure it was not a trap. The Grunts were guarding a white washed stone ramp that led up to a raised platform supported by stone pillars. Nothing seemed to be underneath it. The grunts were the only defense.

He inched his way to the nearby unsuspecting grunts and readied his knife. They seemed to be more alert than usual. A boring task like this would often cause them to sleep. Had that been the case, their deaths wouldn't have been required. How unfortunate for them. His softened footsteps went undetected and he rose from his crouch walk until he was at his full height. There was a slight light distortion around him as he moved due to the nature of active camo, but it wasn't noticed. When he was right beside the left grunt, he kicked it with all the force he could muster. The grunt flew into its partner and both ended up as a formless mass of alien tissue, their blood painting a nearby rock. They didn't even get a chance to scream.

He sent the green light to the Spartans and the team moved up to his position. Once they were together, Vega took point and they walked up the white stone ramp. Soon after they entered onto a stone bridge that crossed over water. The bridge was composed of a darker stone than the ramp was. The walls on either side of them seemed to be made of a white metal. There was no roof above them, making the Sangheili ships floating overhead all the more ominous. Shepard felt uneasy. This wasn't a good position. If they got ambushed there, they would be trapped. Each step they took was with caution. The Spartans scanned for traps and sensors but found none. They continued their careful hike until they came across a door at the end of the bridge.

The Spartans took breaching positions. Ashley and Kaidan hugged two stone pillars supporting the bridge while Mordin went to work on a nearby console. The others readied themselves for when the door was going to open.

Mordin's fingers seemed to move as fast as lightning as he operated the console.

"Interesting. Console controls more than door. Has access to base alarms too. Possibly even trigger alarms on far side of base. Orders?", Mordin said.

"Do it.", Shepard said without hesitation.

Mordin did as he was told and everyone readied their weapons. The gray door opened up and everyone stormed inside. The Spartans came through first, followed by the Salarrians. The building looked like it was some kind of warehouse. Massive crates were stacked together in some places and others looked like they had been slung across the floor by a giant. There weren't any enemies in sight.

The Spartans activated Spartan Vision on their VISRs, but couldn't see anything past the crates. They remained vigilant. Spartan Vision wouldn't detect a cloaked Sangheili. They carefully watched their surroundings for light distortions of any kind.

The team fanned out and slowly explored the warehouse, never leaving each other's line of sight. Such an experience was unnerving for them, but the warriors were hardened. This was not the first time they had gone into hostile enemy territory.

Garrus looked through the scope of his sniper rifle to see if he could spot something. Nothing. No matter where they looked, this warehouse seemed to be completely empty. It made no sense. Saren had the manpower to occupy the base and wage a war outside. Even with the false alarm going off, he would have left someone here. Why was this place just abandoned? Maybe they had gotten lucky for once. Then again, their luck hadn't been so great lately.

Morlin was on the far side of the group. He swept the warehouse with his omnitool but found nothing. The others were steadily moving away from his position. He was about to rejoin them when he spotted a container that didn't look like the others in the warehouse. The others were large and boxy, painted in a white color. This one was smaller. It was about as tall as the average humanoid and about as round as a volus. Its aesthetic was purple and bulbous. On further examination it appeared to be a weapons rack of some sort. Strange curved guns made of a purple metal were hanging from it.

Morlin turned around and spotted Kirrahe not too far away. He was standing near Shepard.

"Captain, I think I've found something!", Morlin said.

Kirrahe and Shepard turned to face him. They began walking towards Morlin when they heard a sound resonate through the air. The aliens were puzzled by it, but Shepard recognized it immediately.

"Morlin! Look out!", Shepard shouted.

It was too late. A Sangheili Zealot uncloaked right behind Morlin and thrust his plasma sword into the STG member's spine. Morlin's lifeless body collapsed to the ground, the alien foe who killed him standing over it.

"Contact!", Shepard shouted over the comms.

Three more Sangheili uncloaked. One was on top of a large crate. The one on top of a crate was carrying a carbine while the other two were carrying a new gun Shepard hadn't seen before. It looked somewhat like a carbine, but more purple. The biggest difference was made obvious when the Sangheili started firing it. Blue plasma blasted

their position. Shepard moved in front of Kirrahe and let his shields absorb the blow. Kirrahe took this time to take cover behind a nearby crate. He opened up on the Sangheili who killed Morlin with his SMG. He managed to significantly weaken the Sangheili's shields, but not break them.

The Sangheili cloaked again and disappeared. Shepard was ready this time. Sangheili were big on honor kills, and killing a "demon" with a sword would award some pretty big points. He stood his ground and paid careful attention to his surroundings. The Sangheili would likely come at him from behind, and given the Elite's advantage it would probably try and rush instead of playing it safe. That would mean it would be on him in a few seconds. Three, two, one...

Shepard turned around just in time to grab the Sangheili's wrist and prevent the alien from stabbing him. He kned the Sangheili in the stomach, probably breaking its ribcage. Then he took his knife and jammed it into the Sangheili's skull through the neck. The body dropped to the floor. Kirrahe stayed in cover the whole time, his heart beating like a drum. There were still three more left. Unfortunately, they were cut off from the rest of the group by the opposing Sangheili. The carbine-wielding Sangheili was terrorizing the other group. Everyone was in cover, the aliens taking cover behind Vega who was using his body like a shield.

He open fired with his Plasma SAW, but the carbine wielding Sangheili simply strafed and dodged the flurry of plasma. Several radiation-emitting crystals bounced off Vega's shields. It was a stalemate between the two.

Shepard popped out of cover to try and aid them, but was immediately suppressed by another Sangheili wielding a plasma rifle. The rifle's rate of fire and heat intensity was far greater than that of most plasma rifles Shepard had faced. The ones the innies used were left over from the war, and to his knowledge the Sangheili were still using that model. This weapon was much better. Who were these people? For the moment, he couldn't worry about that. The plasma was vaporizing their cover and soon he and Kirrahe were going to be toast. He needed to get to the others. He considered ordering grenades to be tossed, but there was no guarantee that would work. He would have to think of something else.

"Kaidan, can you lend a hand?", Shepard asked over the comms.

Kaidan tried moving out of cover but took a hit to his shields immediately.

"Would love to Commander, but I can't get a clear shot. I doubt Garrus could either. The Salarrians are staying behind Vega for now, but even his shields won't last forever. Do you have a plan?", Kaidan said.

Vega grunted over the comms.

"I hope you're listening to Kaidan. I've tried hitting them with my plasma, but between the hinge head with the new gun and the hinge head with the carbine, I'm not going to make it. Even my armor and augs won't be able to survive forever. I can keep going for a while longer, but they'll eventually break through.", Vega said.

Shepard tried leaning out of cover to get a closer look, but was forced back into cover by the sole Sangheili pinning them down. Shepard gritted his teeth. The Elites, as they were often called, were highly disciplined. They knew this warehouse like the back of their hand. They waited until this exact moment to ambush because they knew the team would get trapped. If he had to guess, they were waiting until they had forced everyone into a tight spot. Odds are that after that they plan to start tossing plasma grenades. Then they could turn their attention to Shepard.

It was why they were focusing their attack on Vega. Vega was protecting the one group that was completely defenseless. If his shields went down, then Ashley and Kaidan would probably go and support him. That would result in them getting bunched together, the perfect target for a plasma grenade. The Elites were nothing if not efficient.

They needed a plan to prevent that from happening. He could try cloaking and flanking, but that would leave Kirrahe behind. He couldn't risk it.

"Vega, use your armor ability. It's new. Use it to try and move the STG to better cover. Ashley, you're our rabbit. Run and give Kaidan some breathing room. Whatever you do, don't get bunched up or they'll start tossed plasma grenades."

He received three green lights as his plan went into action. Ashley sprinted out of cover too quickly for the Sangheili to get a shot at her. One of them even tried throwing a plasma grenade, but it missed as she ran right past it.

This bought Kaidan enough time to move out of cover. He hammed the trigger on his Battle Rifle two times and six bullets through through the air, their inertia increasing the second they made contact with the Sangheili on the ground. The Elite's shield could not hold back the inertia of the bullets as they bore through and into the creature's skull. The Elite on the ground was dead. That left the one on top of the crate and the one harassing Shepard.

The Elite on top of the create grew desperate and hammered the carbine's trigger. Vega activated his armor ability before the rounds got a chance to connect and a shield consisting of hard light deflected the crystals.

Kaidan's gauntlet glowed dark blue with dark energy and he tossed a biotic blast up into the air. It went over the crate and homed in on the Elite harassing Shepard. The blast disrupted the Elite's shield and ate at his armor, tearing it apart molecule by molecule. It forced the Elite to drop his rifle.

Shepard saw his chance. He popped out of cover and threw his monomolecular knife. The blade spun around its axis and carved into the Elite's skull. Shepard sprinted out of cover and pulled his knife out of the Elite's skull.

The Elite atop the large crate realized his plan was falling apart. He started spamming plasma grenades everywhere out of desperation, hoping that he would get lucky. They anticipated this. Kaidan retreated back behind cover, Ashley simply dodged, and Vega shielded the others from attack using his hardlight shield. None landed near

Kirrahe or Shepard.

Shepard charged up a plasma bolt from his pistol and shot it, stripping the Elite's shields. Garrus jumped out from behind Vega and shot the Elite in the chest with his sniper rifle.

The Elite clutched the hole in his armor and fell from the crate, dropping his carbine in the process. Everyone came out of cover and Shepard rejoined the team. He went and knelt over the Elite. He was still alive. Shepard grabbed the alien by the shoulders and shook him.

"Wake up, hinge head.", Shepard said.

The Elites eyes opened and gave Shepard a glare.

"Who are you? When did the Sangheili enter this galaxy? Why are you working with Saren? What do you know about the Reapers! Answer me!", Shepard shouted.

The Elite coughed some and bellowed a deep laugh.

"Demon, your hour of undoing is at hand. Soon, the Heralds will take us to our god. With the righteous at his side, we will reduce your people to ash. When the true Great Journey begins, the evil of your kind will seal your doom.", he said with a menacing pride.

Shepard stood to his full height and towered over the dying Sangheili.

"So you're Covenant. Well then, if you want to see your gods, then who am I to stop you?", Shepard said.

He raised the heavy boot of his MJOLNIR armor over the Elite's head and stomped. The sole of his boot connected with the Sangheili's head and ended the Elite's life.

For a moment time stood still as everyone paused. The aliens didn't understand a thing, lacking the context necessary. Yet even they knew that the Elites words were ominous. The Spartans took their place at Shepard's side and stood over what was left of the Elite.

"Covenant? I thought we got the last of them on Feh1 Prime.", Ashley said.

"I thought we did too.", Vega said.

Feh1 Prime was a bitter memory for him, a nightmare he thought he could escape. Not even traveling to another galaxy was enough to separate him from it. There was no running. The past was catching up with the present.

"It seems the Covenant are a more resilient enemy than we suspected.", Kaidan said.

Everyone turned as Kirrahe walked around the corner. He was carrying Morlin's dead body in his arms. A solemn expression involuntarily took form on each of the STG members' faces.

"He was the youngest of us.", Kirrahe said softly.

He put the young operative's corpse on the ground. It had two holes in the thin abdomen of the Salarian, the work of a plasma blade.

Garrus folded his rifle up and slung it onto his back and looked at the cold, dead eyes that only a minutes ago were full of life. Losing troops always ate a piece of his soul, but this was different. He hadn't felt this way in a while. This wasn't like simply losing an infantryman. This was personal. This felt like losing his team on Omega again. Whatever these things were, whoever they served, they were going to pay.

"We can't take him with us. Protocol dictates we dispose of the body.", Padok quietly said.

Mordin nodded and fired a blob of superheated omnigel at the body. The blast slowly incinerated the body. The salarians simply watched. Even Kirrahe, the normally stoic intelligence operative, had sadness on his face. Shepard understood their sorrow. He had lost friends in the field as well. He knew what it was they were feeling. They felt regret. Regret that they never treated the rookie better. Regret that they didn't say sorry for whatever wrong they might have done him, no matter how small or insignificant it might have been. Most of all, it was regret that they weren't there in time to save him. When it came down to it, humans and aliens weren't so different after all. If there was anything that all intelligent life shared, it was sorrow.

"We need to move.", Shepard said softly.

The STG members turned from their former colleague's funeral pyre and gathered themselves the best they could. There was still a mission to be completed.

"Agreed. We don't have much time.", Kirrahe said stoically.

The team moved back into formation and entered a hallway that connected to the warehouse. The hallway was empty, save for a few scattered weapon racks. The alarm diversion was either working, or the entire force was focusing on moving out. They were careful to check the surrounding area for light distortions. They didn't have time to fight another team of Elites. Fortunately, the wide, gray hallway was devoid of enemies. They eventually reached a circular room made of a grayish-white metal. There were four automatic doors. Each one was labelled to indicate the room it connected. The door on the far left was labelled "Loading Bay". The door directly in front of the team was labelled "Bio-Lab". The door far right of them was labelled "Computer Lab". Then there was a whitewashed metal ramp that led up to another door labelled "Full Clearance Only". He could guess where it went.

Shepard's comms crackled.

"Shepard-Commander, we have spotted a large amount of infantry taking positions in a courtyard directly underneath the largest vessel. There appears to be a purple beam being used to transport vehicles and other cargo onto the ship.", Legion said.

Shepard stopped walking, and the team stopped with him. He knew

Legion was referring to a gravity beam. Sangheili and Covenant ships used them when they needed to transport large quantities of mass from the surface onto their ship. That meant they were taking something with them. Whether it was simply vehicles and weapons he did not know, but it was possible that they found what they were looking for and were taking it with them. He couldn't allow that. The question was what exactly the Covenant wanted. What could compel them to travel all the way to another galaxy? It couldn't be for political gain. The only reason would be if they thought there was a Forerunner artifact here. That was a chilling thought. The last time the Covenant had access to a major Forerunner artifact, they nearly wiped out all life in the galaxy. Whatever they were looking for, it couldn't be good.

Legion's news also indicated another problem. If they were already loading up, then they were getting ready to leave. Victus wouldn't stand a chance against a CSS Battlecruiser. The Normandy couldn't hold off all three ships. The Spartans were the only shot at stopping it from escaping.

"Kaidan, Vega, did you catch that?", Shepard said.

"Yes sir. The Covies are loading up.", Kaidan said.

Shepard paused for a moment. There was no way they could take every wing of the building together. There was no time. They would have to split up. It would be risky, but at this point they had little choice. They couldn't afford to let the Covenant get away. Unfortunately, it would also mean forgoing getting the Genophage cure. It was a necessary sacrifice.

"Okay everyone, here's what we're going to do. STG, you take the labs. Find the Genophage cure and make sure it hasn't left the planet. Find out what other experiments Saren was doing. Ashley, you take the Computer wing. Find and extract EDI. Vega, Kaidan, I need you to hit the loading bay. Stall them. Do whatever you have to, but make sure that the Covenant does not leave this planet. Garrus, you and I are going to find Saren. Move out.", Shepard said.

Everyone nodded and proceeded to the tasks. The STG members went to the Bio-Lab, Ashley went to the Computer wing, Vega and Kaidan went to the Loading Bay. Garrus took a look at his sniper rifle and gave Shepard a determined nod. He and Shepard went up the ramp. Garrus hugged the door frame and readied his sniper rifle while Shepard drew his pistol and cloaked. Garrus tried opening the door with his omnitool, to no avail.

"It's locked, Shepard.", Garrus said with annoyance.

Shepard uncloaked. If EDI was here, she could open the door. He could still get in, but he couldn't do it quietly. He checked his Spartan vision to see what was in the hallway on the other side. Empty. He could still open it undetected.

"Nothing is locked for a Spartan.", Shepard said.

He kicked the metal door with all his might, breaking the door out of its frame and into the hallway on the other side. Garrus simply smirked as he followed Shepard inside. The hallway was short and empty, but wide enough to move large objects through. It had the same

general aesthetic as the rest of the base. They reached the end of the hall quickly and found another door. Shepard used Spartan vision to look inside, but couldn't see anything. It was as if the building was made of a material designed to prevent it from working. Garrus tapped the haptic interface. This time it worked. The door opened and Shepard burst inside with his gun drawn. It was then he fully saw the contents of the room. It was a prison chamber. Turian soldiers stood behind a tinted translucent wall.

Garrus folded up his rifle and ran towards the nearest cell.

"Soldier, are you still alive?", Garrus said.

The Turian saluted at the sight of Garrus, a face he recognized. He looked on edge, as if he was drugged. The soldier was so jumpy even the stone-solid Turian salute was wavering.

"Yes sir. Lieutenant Adrien Dorn of the Hierarchy Fleet. Captured over Parthia. You're Garrus Vakarian, right?", the shaky soldier said.

Garrus's facial expression reflected his realization that something was wrong about the soldier. There was no reason for a soldier to be this jumpy, especially a Turian soldier. Turians were the military branch of the Council for a reason. It would not be easy to shake one up.

"Yes, that's me. Are you alright?", said Garrus with deep concern.

The soldier nodded.

"Yes sir. They tried to break me. Played awful sounds, deprived me of sleep, constantly whispering in my EAR! But I'm alright! Just give me a weapon and I'll join the fight!", he said.

Garrus opened his omnitool and began typing commands when Shepard shook his head in disagreement.

"Don't do it. Something isn't right about this. Saren has done something to them. We have no way to extract them. I'm sorry, but we shouldn't risk it.", Shepard said.

Garrus glared.

"No, we'll find a way. If Saren has done something, then we should find out what. We need to get these soldiers back home.", he said.

He hacked into the system and opened the doors to all five cells. The prisoners immediately rushed him, trying to claw at Garrus with their talons. However, they were no match for Shepard. Spartan Time kicked in and he fired five shots from his pistol. His fast reflexes ensured that he had 100% accuracy at this range. Each shot bored through the heads of the Turian soldiers. Not one touched Garrus.

Garrus scooted back and drew his rifle, his heart beating like a drum.

"What just happened? Turian soldiers are loyal to the end. Why would they attack like that?", Garrus said.

Shepard lowered his weapon.

"I don't know, but I have a feeling we're going to find out.", Shepard said.

* * *

><p>Ashley sprinted down the hallway connecting to the computer lab so fast she was a blur. Her shotgun was drawn and loaded in case she ran into trouble. At this point, there was no point in worrying about stealth. Her reflexes were quick enough to attack before her opponent could. All Spartans had fast reflexes, but she was part of a special class of Spartans designed to be speed demons. Spartan Time merely seemed to slow down time to a degree for other Spartans. For her, it nearly came to a stop. Her near-precog reaction time all but guaranteed that she could handle a threat. Now, it was coming in handy. There was a door at the end of the hallway, but she didn't bother stopping. The inertia of her armor would be more than enough to break it down.<p>

She sped forward shoulder first and broke through the door. The room on the other side was full of computer terminals with orange holographic interfaces. She activated Spartan Vision on her VISR to see if she could spot EDI. All the forward terminals didn't detect her presence. However, in the very back of the room, there was an AI chip. EDI. Unfortunately, it was guarded by six blue, female aliens. Their scalp was made of what looked like tentacles. They were Asari. Since they were wearing full body armor and carrying shotguns, she assumed they were the dreaded Asari Commandos. And they had already spotted her.

Ashley juke'd to the side and avoided a shotgun blast from one of the Commandos and fired off a blast from her own shotgun. The blast got absorbed by the commando's kinetic barrier, but the tiny crystal pellets exploded and drained the barrier completely. Ashley fired another shot before the commando even moved and killed her. The other commandos were already springing into action. Ashley repeated the process with two more commandos when a fourth hurled a sphere of dark energy towards her. The sphere homed in on her, but was too slow moving to catch up with the flash of a Spartan. She effortlessly rolled out of the way and delivered a punch to the Asari's chest. The force was so great that it shattered the commando's ribcage and ruptured her heart. The Asari collapsed from the trauma and began to bleed out. Ashley charged and delivered a punch to another commando. It broke the commando's neck and she fell lifelessly to the ground.

Ashley prepared to repeat the process when the final Asari threw another sphere of dark energy. This time instead of tracking the Spartan, it landed directly in front of her. The sphere erupted into a single point of near infinite mass, creating an all-consuming gravity well. Its range was limited, but it was just close enough to pull her in. Ashley struggled helplessly against the pull. Her swiftness did her no good against the hungry singularity. She was picked up and tossed around like a ragdoll. The Asari commando saw this as her chance. She raised her mass effect-enhanced shotgun and prepared to fire a blast.

However, the commando made a grave miscalculation. While the gravity well was tossing Ashley around and keeping her generally immobile, it did not exert enough force to prevent her from moving her arms. Ashley used this to her advantage and twisted her body so she was facing the Asari. She let off two blasts from her shotgun and reduced the Asari to a pulp of blue biomass. The singularity dissipated and Ashley landed on her feet.

After a cursory check to make sure there were no enemies left, she strolled over to the bench at the back of the room. She picked up EDI's chip and plugged it into her helmet. For a moment, nothing happened. Then EDI's spherical avatar materialized in the uppermost left corner of her VISR display.

"EDI, are you okay?", Ashley said.

EDI paused for a second before answering.

"Yes, I think I'm okay. It is urgent that I speak with Shepard. I have important information. The Covenant are here, and they have a new master.", she said.

She sounded somewhat dazed, if it was possible for an AI to be dazed. However, the scans showed no serious damage had been done and she was functioning well within the safety limit. She would be fine.

"We just found out. Don't worry EDI, we'll get you out of here.", Ashley said.

With her task completed, she turned around and sprinted back out of the computer lab.

* * *

><p>The Salarians carefully stalked down the large blue-lit hallway. They held their SMGs out in front of them, aiming down the sights with concentration that would rival a Spartan. The STG had plenty of weapons ranging from the mundane to the bizarre, but SMGs were generally used for infiltration missions. They were compact and easy to use in confined spaces. That was in addition to the formidable omnitool enhancements they had. Despite their impressive armament, they felt mortality more than they had in a long time. Vigilance was what was on their mind. They were already down one man. They couldn't afford to lose another.<p>

Kirrahe had taken point. Mordin was to his left and Padok was to his right. Their careful stalk led them down the hall until they reached a rounded-off corner. The three of them hugged the wall. There was no sense in blindly rushing around a corner.

Kirrahe was the first to move. He strafed out of cover with his SMG first. The sight that met him was almost enough to cause him to drop his weapon. He waved the other two STG operatives over so they could see as well. They all lowered their weapons.

The team had reached the laboratory the sign indicated would be here. Holographic images of DNA double helixes lined several computer terminal screens. There were many images of genes labelled "Krogan", but more than a few were also labelled as other species. The

implications were staggering. Krogan were not the only species Saren was using to build a clone army. They were simply the quickest since they could breed to increase their numbers, so long as they had a stable genepool. Saren had collected more than enough DNA templates to make that happen.

However, the most disturbing aspect was not what was the room itself but what could be viewed from the room. Both walls were made of a transparent plastic-glass material. They gave a perfect view of a ghastly sight. Clones of Krogan and Turians were mindlessly marching towards ominous purple spikes. One by one they impaled themselves on them, not exhibiting any self preservation instincts. After a few minutes the spikes retracted and a new creature was born.

They gaped in horror at the creatures' hideous appearance. The creatures looked like a mangled form of a Turian chock full of cybernetics. Its eyes, for it could no longer be thought of as a person, glowed a hue of blue that added to its ominous appearance. There was no Turian left inside of the monster. It was simply the husk of a Turian from which the soul had been drained and eldritch technology had taken its place. The STG Operatives had seen many horrible things, but this was almost too much to look at.

The Krogan didn't look much better. The husks looked much bigger and tougher than average. Their jagged teeth were highlighted by terrifying green glowing eyes. The spikes turned them into a lumbering mass of muscle. It didn't appear to have any more intelligence than a domesticated animal.

Mesmerized by the horror, the Salarians absent mindedly walked further into the room. Their weapons weren't even raised. Their highly intelligent minds were devoting nearly all the concentration they had to comprehend what they were seeing.

As they walked through the room, they eventually walked into another corridor. There was another one-way mirror in the corridor which all three Salarians turned to look at. Seconds later they wished they hadn't. For as terrible as the previous sights were, this one surpassed all others.

There was a machine. It was not white or cream like the rest of the building's general aesthetic. Its image could barely be comprehended by mortal minds, but the best the Salarians could make out it was sleek and purple. Its design aesthetic was similar to that of the Mass Relays. It was essentially a pillar with four arms, two of which had blades attached. The other two were more like tentacle fingers. Two large, white tables stood on both sides of the machine. A Turian husk mindlessly lied down on the right table and the lumbering Krogan husk took a spot on the left. The machine took its blade to them and went to work.

The machine was a surgeon, and the tables were operating tables.

The Salarians desperately tried but ultimately failed to look away as the machine extracted the Turian husk's head and nervous system while removing the Krogan's. It then grafted it into what remained of the Krogan husk's muscular body. An electrical current arced across the hybrid husk's body and the eyes in the Turian skull lit up with a crimson red. It was alive. The creature rose from the table and the tentacles bound pieces of heavy metal armor onto the beast. It then

walked away on all fours. Then the process repeated with more husks.

The uncanny image emanated an unnatural aura around it that could not be interpreted as anything but evil. Even looking at the monster was enough to make one feel ill. It was all the Salarians could do to keep the contents of the stomachs from winding up on the polished white floor.

They ran out of the corridor and back into the main lab. They lifted their SMGs back up and checked every shadow out of paranoia.

Mordin began reciting laws of science and hypothesizing, trying to find some way to lie to himself and convince himself that what he saw wasn't real.

"...Did you see what I saw?", Padok said in shock.

Kirrahe simply nodded. They were all too shaken to discuss it further. They had seen many awful sights in their careers as STG operatives. However, nothing was as bad as this. Those creatures were just...unnatural. They seemed perfectly plausible, yet incomprehensible at the same time. The paradox was maddening.

Kirrahe recomposed himself the best he could and resumed his typical stoic look. He couldn't allow for them to fall apart right now. Fear was a luxury they could not afford.

"We have to get this information back to command. They need to know what we're up against. We've only just scratched the surface. First, the genophage cure. It has to be on one of these terminals. Padok, get scanning. Mordin, you watch our flank. I'll watch the door.", Kirrahe said.

Though they were still shaken and more than likely mentally scarred for life, they knew their duty. The operatives summoned whatever reserves of willpower they had and went to their jobs.

Padok opened his omnitool and activated the sophisticated adaptive hacking program the STG often used for these kind of missions. It scanned through each of the terminal's files, looking for the target.

"Found it. Extracting now.", Padok said.

The team closed in closer together in preparation to leave. They would have to get out of the lab fast if they wanted to escape the base in time.

"Extraction complete. Let's move.", Padok said.

Not a second after he spoke a red light began to flash in the room and a siren began to sound.

"INTRUDER ALERT.", a computerized female voice said.

Padok raised his weapon and glared. They should have known Saren would have better cyber security than that.

They prepared to move, but abruptly halted. The salarrians' normally fast-beating hearts stopped for a second and their blood chilled. They found themselves frozen by the stares of what seemed like hundreds of cybernetic husks. The unnatural aura of terror the creatures released was enough for even the hardened STG operatives to become paralyzed with fear. Their uncanny glowing eyes seemed to pierce the soul. The pause seemed to last an eternity.

"Do you think they can see us through the one way mirror?", Padok whispered.

"No. Impossible. One way mirror is opaque on their side. Unless of course they use infrared vision. Then possible...", Mordin responded, not helping at all.

The husks suddenly charged towards them and started banging on the glass, well aware of the STG's presence and ready to kill them all. The will to survive overcame their crippling fear and the team sprinted for the exit. It was just in time to escape as the husks finally broke through the glass and began to pour into the lab. The salarrians kept running, not even looking back at the abominations chasing them.

Padok hacked the door with his omnitool as they ran. It opened just in time for them to get through. Padok hacked the door again, this time to jam it shut. Just like that the door closed. It couldn't be opened from the inside. They could still hear the husks beating against the door, but it would be awhile before they could break through. The team had bought a brief respite.

"Next step?", Mordin asked.

Kirrahe looked at the door. It was bending ever so slightly against the repeated poundings the husks were giving it. Eventually, the door would fail and those things would swarm the facility. Things were already bad enough. They couldn't allow the other groups to get flanked by an unknown enemy.

Kirrahe attempted to raise the rest of the team on the comms channel, but found only static. They were being jammed. There was no choice now. They couldn't warn anyone else and they couldn't call for backup.

Kirrahe raised his SMG towards the door.

"Take defensive positions. We will hold the line."

* * *

><p>Shepard and Garrus continued their careful trek through the most important part of the base. Things seemed to just keep getting weirder. Both of them were still trying to figure out what could possibly have made loyal soldiers just attack like that. Furthermore, why would they be so stupid as to attack two armed men? Surely they could have waited and done more damage. It didn't make any sense.<p>

They reached another door. Shepard tried his Spartan Vision again to see if he could detect anything, but it was to no avail. This part of the base was somehow shielded from Spartan Vision attempts. They

would have to go in blind. Garrus got behind Shepard and he readied his pistol and blade. They opened the door. It led to a bridge similar to the one they had to cross to enter the main base. Shepard checked for light distortions but saw none. Deeming the bridge relatively safe, he and Garrus stepped out onto it. The air seemed heavier and filled with smoke. The land below was scarred with craters and vitrified soil. Hundreds of dead Task Force soldiers littered the former battleground. Broken and melted Mako tanks were also a common sight.

Garrus glared at the scene. Despite all of their preparations, despite their massive invasion force and technologically advanced weapons, they still lost the ground battle. A look up didn't bear good news for the battle in space, either. Seraph after Seraph took off from the Battlecruiser. They were flying up into the outer atmosphere, eager to burn away the remaining fleet. The Task Force had no defense against the newcomers' weapons. It was only a matter of time now. Soon the magnificent fleet they took such great effort to build would be space debris. It all seemed hopeless. Garrus took another good look at the battlefield. There was nothing he could do to save those that died now. The only option he had left now was to make sure their sacrifice was not in vain. He had to kill Saren, no matter what the cost.

Shepard was also viewing the former battlefield, but was taking a much more pragmatic approach to the scene. He focused on the tactical situation. His first impression was that the Task Force troops were a very mobile force that could pull in or out of a battle much faster than he had seen in other forces. It was very impressive that they managed to evacuate so much of the invasion force in such a short time. Unfortunately, it was at a cost. They left behind several vehicles and mobile supply dumps in their haste. He didn't blame them. Given their lack of defense against energy weapons, they would have been slaughtered if they tried to salvage the remaining supplies.

The enemy ground forces were also in the process of pulling back. Squads of Covenant soldiers were boarding Phantoms and other vehicles along with the Krogan troops. They all looked like they were making their way towards the loading yard which was directly underneath the Covenant battle cruiser. It seemed to be more evidence that his initial theory was correct. Saren and his forces were preparing to leave the planet. However, the fact that they weren't already heading into orbit and only deploying Seraphs to soften things up for them meant that not everything was loaded onto the ships yet. There was an opportunity here. As long as things weren't fully loaded onto the ships, they couldn't leave. They didn't have enough ships left to make a sequenced evacuation. That meant there would be a window of time where the majority of Saren's army would be bunched up inside of the base. If he could detonate the Pelican's nuke in that time frame, then it was possible to wipe out a significant portion of Saren's planetary army in a single stroke. It all depended on whether Kaidan and Vega could buy enough time for him and Garrus to kill Saren. It was a tough mission, but Kaidan and Vega were tough. If anyone could gum up Saren's warmachine, it was them.

"Let's go.", Shepard said.

The two of them continued along the bridge until they heard a strange sound. Shepard recognized it. It was a plasma pistol going off.

Shepard motioned for Garrus to take cover behind a stone column and he activated his active camo cloak. He readied his knife and pistol. Then he crouch walked forward, careful not to make any sudden moves that might show light distortion. He reached the end of the bridge. It led to a large office. It was covered by a roof but did not have and doors or windows, allowing for the gentle breeze to cool the room. It was barren except for the desk in the back right hand corner of the room. That, and the three Jackals with shield gauntlets and plasma pistols standing over and Asari's dead body. They had just got done shooting her, evidenced by the plasma burns on her chest.

Shepard crouch walked near the entrance. He considered calling in marksman support from Garrus, but decided against it. It was only three Jackals, and if Garrus fired his rifle it might give away their position. He could handle them by himself.

He crouch walked forward, still cloaked. The Jackals seemed to be just standing around the Asari's body. One of them kicked it just to make sure she was dead. They were distracted. Shepard sneaked inside until he was directly behind one of them. He raised his knife and stabbed it in the head, separating the brain from the spinal cord and causing instant death. The other two noticed and tried firing their plasma pistols. Shepard grabbed one of the Jackals before it could fire and used its shield to block the other Jackal's plasma pistol shot. He then tossed the Jackal he was holding into the one who had attacked and knocked them both off balance. They were both directly in front of each other without their shield gauntlets raised.

Shepard took a millisecond to aim and fire his pistol. The bullet passed through the first Jackal and into the next, killing both enemies.

"Clear.", Shepard said.

Garrus jogged into the office and saw the carnage. It didn't seem to phase him. Shepard knelt down and examined one of the bodies. It was immediately obvious that this wasn't a normal Jackal. Most Jackals were bird like. These were like lizards. They had to be a subspecies. Shepard got up and took a look at the dead Asari. Garrus walked over until he was over the body as well.

"This was an assassination.", Garrus said.

Shepard nodded.

"I agree. The question is, what made her important enough to be killed? Garrus, can you get into her computer?", Shepard asked.

Garrus opened up his omnitool and scanned through her computer, reading emails and various files stored there.

"Looks like she was getting cold feet. She seemed to be a research scientist studying something called 'indoctrination'. The other files are too encrypted to crack without your AI.", Garrus said.

Shepard took another look at the Jackals.

"I think we're close to Saren.", Shepard said.

"Why do you say that?", Garrus said as he closed his omnitool.

"I doubt those Jackals are alone. That means there are more Covenant nearby. The only reason they would be here instead of near their ship is if there was something worthy of protecting nearby. Given the level we're on, I think that something might be Saren. Come on, let's move.", Shepard said.

They readied their weapons and went to the elevator in the back left hand corner of the room. Luckily it was still unlocked. The two stepped inside and prepared for a fight. There was no way to know whether there were enemy troops above them. The elevator continued rising for a few more seconds and then stopped. The doors opened to a room full of grunts and Sangheili. The two didn't go unnoticed for long.

"Demon!", a Sangheili Major shouted as he pulled a plasma grenade. Shepard's reflexes kicked in and he shot it while it was in the Elite's hand. The grenade detonated and killed at least four grunts and one Sangheili. Shepard and Garrus rushed in and went to work. Plasma bolts and carbine shards were absorbed by their shields as they charged forward with their guns blazing. The room turned into a flurry of plasma and mass accelerated bullets. Shepard knifed several enemies and shot a few more Sangheili until the clip was empty. Garrus killed another Sangheili with a point blank shot to the head with his sniper rifle. Shepard reattached his pistol to the magnetic strip on his waist and pulled out his mass effect-enhanced battle rifle to finish off the rest of the group. The two of them continued to fight while the enemy numbers began to dwindle. Despite being vastly outnumbered, they managed to take the Covenant by surprise. Their lightning quick attack capitalized on their advantage and soon the enemy force was in confusion. Without organization, the Elites could not put up a viable defense against the skill and power of Shepard and Garrus. One by one they succumbed until the room was filled with the scattered corpses of Covenant soldiers.

Shepard reloaded all of his weapons and checked to make sure they hadn't missed anything. Their work was thorough, however. No Covenant troops had been left alive and none had escaped. No alarm had been sounded. The rest of the base didn't even know they were there. More adrenaline began to race through Shepard's body. The amount of Covenant here was no accident. Given how disoriented they were, it was probable that they were moving towards something. That something was probably Saren. They were close to their target. He could feel it.

They examined their surroundings more closely now that the fog of war had lifted. The room they were standing in was very different from the other rooms in the base. The other rooms were made from white washed stone or metal. This was made of a black metal. It had metal grated floors not unlike those on the Normandy. They continued walking and reached a door.

Shepard covered for Garrus as he opened the door. Once open, they stepped through and into a large hallway with metal a similar design aesthetic as the last room. However, it was what was at the end of the hallway that was the real surprise. A lone Sangheili was facing a strange artifact. Beside him was a floating tentacle creature. It was a Huragok. Shepard frowned underneath his helmet. ONI believed that

all the Huragok had scattered after the Covenant's defeat. To see one of them beside a Sangheili was disturbing.

Shepard cloaked and Garrus took cover by hugging a support frame that helped keep the hallway's structural integrity.

"Huragok! You must give us access to the holy relic. It is the will of the gods!", the Sangheili said with frustration.

The Huragok responded with its unique form of sign language. Shepard had seen Falls use it many times before. He was a little bit rusty on his Huragok language skills, but he knew enough to develop a rough translation.

"No. You are not Reclaimer or Forerunner.", it said.

Shepard's interest was immediately piqued. He slowly moved closer to overhear more of the conversation.

"Huragok, you know the key to finding him is inside of that relic! We need your assistance! If nothing else, help us bring it to the ship.", the Sangheili begged.

Shepard was astonished at the sight. It was obvious that they had been going at each other for a long time. A Sangheili would never beg unless it was desperate. However, that time was over. Shepard silently walked over and plunged his knife into the Sangheili's neck. He removed the knife and the body fell to the floor. Unfortunately, this seemed to spook the Huragok and it floated off. Shepard considered chasing after it, but was instead drawn to the artifact in front of him. It was a silver pillar that gleamed with a metallic shine. It had to be at least twice as tall as he was. Strangely, it was not a single piece of metal. It was actually four metal pieces suspended in the air. Two side pieces floated in the grooves of the main column and another larger piece floated on top. It seemed to be filled with a blue colored energy.

Shepard would recognize the aesthetic anywhere. It was Forerunner. It all made sense now. The Covenant came because of Forerunner relics. Whatever this was, they wanted it, and from the sound of that conversation they couldn't activate it. They needed a Huragok to do it for them, and they were apparently being uncooperative. However, it was different for him. He was a Reclaimer. He could activate the artifact. He took a step forward and nearly touched it, but hesitated at the last moment. What if this device activated a weapon like Halo? He had no idea what he was walking into. However, he also knew that there was no time to load it onto the Normandy and he needed to know what was so important about it. He overcame his reservations and lightly touched the metallic pillar with his right hand.

In an instant it seemed as if his spirit had been yanked from his body. After a moment the disorientation of the journey left him and he examined his surroundings. He was in a realm he had never seen before. It was bright, almost blindingly so. A blue sky above was dotted with white clouds. A look to his flanks revealed that clouds were also on both sides. He was standing on a shining platform of Forerunner design. In front of him was another platform about the same size as the one he was standing on. It was empty for a moment, but then it changed in the blink of an eye.

A being materialized on the platform. It wore long flowing robes down its back but its arms were free. It floated just a few inches above the ground. It was wearing metallic armor that looked similar in appearance to other Forerunner metals. Its helmet had two large pieces extend over its shoulders and an orange visor covered most of the being's face save his mouth and chin. It was truly a majestic sight. The being was clearly of a race humanity had not had contact with, and judging from the armor Shepard couldn't help but wonder. Could it really be what he thought?

The being removed its helmet and revealed its face. Its nose was very flat and its skin was pale. The being's eyes were rather sunken as well, but otherwise it looked astonishingly similar to a human. Much more so than other alien races he had met, barring perhaps the Asari. Even then it was a close competitor.

Shepard began to open his mouth when the being answered his question before it was even asked.

"I am Forerunner. You are currently in a fragment of the Domain.", the Forerunner said.

Shepard was without words as he saw the magnificence of the Forerunner before him.

"Who are you?", Shepard asked.

The Forerunner gave a friendly smile.

"My name is very long and difficult to pronounce, but you may call me by my title. I am the Cartographer, a Lifeworker.", he said.

Shepard considered taking his helmet off so he could let the Forerunner see his face, but opted against it. He didn't know enough yet for that kind of trust.

"How are you still alive?", Shepard asked.

"I do not suppose I really am. From a point of view, no Forerunner ever truly dies. Our last memories and experiences are given up into the Domain, where your mind currently is. Through long meditation and refinement of a technique I developed, I managed to send a portion of my consciousness into the Domain for preservation. In essence, I am only half alive.", the Cartographer said.

Shepard suppressed the urge to whistle at the feat. It served as a reminder to him that no matter how powerful humanity had become over the past years, they still couldn't hold a candle to the full might of the Forerunners.

"So tell me, Cartographer, what is a Forerunner artifact doing all the way in another galaxy?", Shepard asked.

The Cartographer sighed. Shepard could tell there was a story coming.

"Long ago, my people were fighting the parasite. Despite our valiant efforts, we were no match for it. Finally we came up with the solution of the Halo Rings."

"Yes, weapons that can wipe out all life in the galaxy. We found them.", Shepard said.

A grim expression took hold on the Cartographers face.

"What do you mean you found them? You speak as if they had been left behind. Did...were they fired?", the Cartographer asked solemnly.

Shepard grimaced. He hadn't considered that this one didn't know of his people's fate. He gave a slow nod. The despair on the Cartographer's face was almost too much for Shepard to bear.

"I knew something was wrong when I couldn't find other Forerunners in the Domain. I suppose it was inevitable. Tell me, reclamer, has humanity taken up the Mantle of Responsibility? Have you become our successors as intended?", the Cartographer asked.

Shepard wasn't sure what to say to that. In humanity's eyes, the Mantle was an old, obsolete concept that doomed the Forerunners to extinction. Only the eggheads in ONI paid much attention to it since they were busy studying them. On the other hand, the Alliance was the dominant force of the galaxy. Technically they were the Mantle bearers by default.

"We are the most powerful race in the galaxy.", Shepard answered, hoping it would be enough.

The Cartographer seemed satisfied with the answer.

"I had hoped one day a Forerunner might find this place. I had hoped that my kind would beat the Flood. However, it is clear that has not happened. You are all that remains in defense of life in the universe. This makes the story I am to tell you all the more important.", the Cartographer said.

Visions suddenly invaded Shepard's mind with a rush unlike he had ever felt before.

"When my people fought the parasite, a number of solutions were sought. Many proposals were made, many were tried. All failed.", the Cartographer said.

Visions of laboratories and military invasion plans flashed through Shepard's mind. They all failed. Then images of the Mass Relay Shepard had gone through appeared. Multiple Forerunner ships circled it like sharks in water.

"Finally, in the later stages of the war we found an artifact. It was a massive purple satellite that was filled with a strange substance. When exposed to an electrical current, it could create a field that altered the mass of any object. We found that it functioned like a slipspace portal, except it was much faster than even the best portal we could build. It did not take us long to figure out that it could send objects to another galaxy in only an instant. Knowing that the Flood was not a threat that was native to our galaxy, we decided to investigate whether it was possible that this object was how the Flood entered the galaxy.", the Cartographer said.

Images of him and three others entered Shepard's mind. They were

entering a small ship that was orbiting the relay.

"It was decided to explore this other galaxy. If the Flood came from it, then perhaps the means to defeat them was also there. If not, then perhaps we could run there to escape the Flood if need be. They selected myself and a few others for the task. We were also given several Engineers as well. I was already known for my exploration work, hence the name Cartographer, so I was the logical choice to lead the mission. The Council sent two Warrior Servants and another Lifeworker to aid me. The ship we were given had the most advanced sensors ever designed. It seemed as if anything was possible.", the Cartographer said.

Shepard saw their ship go use the Mass Relay in a similar way he did not so long ago. It was a chilling similarity.

"We discovered a new galaxy. Our examinations revealed that the galaxy was dotted with these mass manipulation devices. It also revealed that it was inhabited. Another civilization was here. It was weaker than our own. We chose not to make contact with them but we did listen in on their communications. We had first presumed that the satellites were built by this civilization, but in time we found that they were not the builders either. So we set out to search for the builders of these devices in the hope that they might have the technology to aid our fight. We searched the galaxy over and over until we finally found an artifact that was made of a similar material as the mass relays.", he said.

Images of a curved, dark purple pyramid a little taller than a Forerunner appeared. It was in a special science wing of the ship being watched by the Forerunners.

"We brought it on board the ship for study in the hope that it might lead us to another relay like the one we used to get here. If this species could create a way from our galaxy to theirs, then perhaps they simply left for another galaxy. We went to work on the object, using only passive scans and observation to study it. The object had a unique composition of an unusually tough metal alloy with micro-geometric shapes etched onto its surface. This first led us to believe that it might have been an artwork of some sort and that this species had incredibly detailed eyesight. So much of our time was spent around the artifact. The other Lifeworker and I usually observed the object through a blast shield of hardlight. We began to notice that the object was emitting an energy field of some sort. It was very subtle, but it was there nonetheless. It didn't appear to be doing anything. Still, we took extra safety precautions.", the Cartographer said.

An image of a Warrior Servant appeared in Shepard's mind. The Warrior Servant was wearing a suit of armor that made MJOLNIR look like rags. It had shining metallic plates with an overlay of hard light armor plating. He was roughly the same size as Shepard and was carrying a formidable rifle-type weapon in his hands.

"However, one of our Warrior Servant allies insisted on standing watch near it at all times. We thought nothing of it. If a Warrior Servant wanted to spend all his time near an object that didn't seem to be yielding any real results, so be it. It was not long after this that I discovered that I had made a horrible mistake.", the Cartographer said grimly.

A new scene entered Shepard's mind yet again, this one much more gruesome than the previous.

"After a while I began to notice that the Warrior Servant was exhibiting strange behavior. He seemed paranoid. Every time I inquired what the problem was, I was simply shrugged off. Seeing as no one else was showing such strange behavior, I began to pay closer attention to the Warrior Servant. Through process of elimination I deduced that the only thing separating him from the rest of us was that he spent a great deal of time around the object, much of it with his armor off. I took a closer look at the data we had drawn from the object. It was only then that I realized what the artifact really was. It was a brainwashing device. The micro-shapes and infrasound it emitted would slowly break down and mold the mind. Once the mind was in a sufficiently malleable state, it could send subliminal messages and control those around it. I and the other Lifeworker were safe because we studied it behind a shield, but it was obvious that the Warrior Servant had fallen prey to its indoctrination. I went to inform the other Warrior Servant on the ship, but I was too late.", he said.

Shepard saw the body of a different Warrior Servant laying on the floor, his body dripping blood. Its armor was crushed and broken. Something vicious and powerful had caught the Warrior off guard and slaughtered him.

"The object already had control of the Warrior Servant. He killed the other guard on the ship and then killed the other Lifeworker. It was just me and him. I donned what was left of the dead Warrior Servant's armor and grabbed one of his weapons. I was certain that my time had come to an end, but somehow I managed to ambush the rogue Warrior Servant. The ensuing fight was one I barely escaped alive. Through great struggle, I succeeded in mortally wounding the rogue Forerunner, but at a cost. Our vessel's slipspace drive and communications system was destroyed. Worse, the automatic repair sequence was destroyed as well. Nearly all vital systems and the means to repair them were vaporized. There was no way to manufacture the necessary parts to repair the ship. Engineers are remarkable creatures, but even they could not make something from nothing. Cannibalizing the ship would have made things even worse. Only life support, navigation and sensors remained fully functioning. The sublight engines had been damaged by a grenade, but they were still half working. Their speed would be much slower. Trapped in deep space and with no way to signal the Ecumene, I was lost. I set course for the nearest habitable planet and destroyed the object.", he said.

Images of the Cartographer studying sensors and data appeared in Shepard's mind.

"I knew that given the damage to the ship, it was unlikely that I would survive the journey to the planet. There were no other cosmic objects that I could possibly intercept to provide materials to repair the ship. I spent my days practicing sending my mind into the Domain and studying the data I gathered on the artifact. When I was not doing that, I used the ship's sensors to observe the civilization of the galaxy's communications and video signals. One day, it all changed.", the Cartographer said.

An image of thousands of large cuttlefish-shaped spaceships flooded his mind. He recognized them instantly. They looked just like the Sovereign, Saren's flagship. They were Reapers.

"I watched in horror as the civilization around me was reduced to ash. I threw every bit of my time studying the invaders. It was difficult to get an appearance, but I finally did. They had the same design aesthetic as the relays and the artifact we found. I had my suspicions at first, but when a desperate signal went out informing other worlds that they had the power to brainwash people, I knew that they were responsible for the Warrior Servant's rampage. My first concern was that they might somehow find my location, but they never came. I tried to think like a Warrior Servant, examining the way the Reapers attacked. They were very cunning and strategically brilliant. Interceptions of communications revealed that they were called the Reapers. The civilization believed they were being harvested, not outright destroyed. I wanted to help them desperately. The Forerunners might have been able to defeat this foe. Alas, it was not to be. I was doomed to sit by and watch as their civilization crumbled.", he said with crippling sadness in his voice.

"Soon it was coming time for me to die. My armor could no longer sustain me. My ship was simply too damaged to make it to the planet in time. Before that happened, I managed to send part of my mind into the Domain while my body decayed and entered the eternal slumber of death. I created this terminal in the hope that one day a Forerunner might find it and do something about the Reapers. Then, I died.", the Cartographer said.

The vision left Shepard and he was back in the Domain. Shepard resisted the urge to rub his head. The intensity of the visions were giving him a headache. They were difficult to fully comprehend. He put them aside for the time being and focused on the Cartographer, who was standing in front of him.

"Reclaimer, I fear that the Reapers will not remain in this galaxy much longer. I fear that they wish to invade our galaxy as well. I believe that they knew of the Forerunners and our power, and I believe that they sent the Mass Relay to our galaxy as a trap. Somehow they knew I would come for them, and bring my ship with me. They must not find it. Their numbers are great and they are very intelligent. If they adapt our technology, they would be nigh unstoppable. They are as great a threat to the Mantle as the Flood once was.", the Cartographer said.

Shepard stepped closer to the Cartographer and removed his helmet, revealing his face to the Forerunner and with it a stern expression. It was a face that was defiant of fate.

"No matter who they are, we'll stop them. We will find a way.", Shepard said.

The Cartographer shook his head.

"Mankind, always so defiant. When the Flood came for you, you sacrificed a third of your population to destroy it. When we came for you, you fought to the last man. Perhaps such a spirit will help you prevail, but it is not enough. The Reapers have the power to bring people to their knees out of the sheer terror of their presence. The micro-geometric patterns and infrasound can break the mind and reduce

brave men to insanity, or worse, create traitors out of them. Only those with great resolve can withstand their terrifying presence, and only those with great discipline of mind can stop themselves from being enthralled through indoctrination. Even then, their odds are slim. However, you have a chance. I sense your strong will. The power to defeat them is already within you, but it must be awakened. I can give you a genesong that will make you immune to the indoctrination and stand bravely against their aura of terror. Your presence will rally all who are around you and protect them from indoctrination. You are already a leader. I can make you more. Will you take the genesong?", the Cartographer said.

Shepard paused for a moment to think it over. Many things didn't make sense. If the Reapers were so powerful, why try and expand to the milky way? And why not attack at a time when humanity was weaker? There was more to this. There had to be. However, he had little choice. If he was going to beat the Reapers, he needed to be immune to their power. Otherwise the war was lost before it had begun.

"Yes.", Shepard said.

The Cartographer gave a friendly smile.

"The Librarian always thought you humans showed promise. I never paid much attention to that, but now I see what she saw in you. She had great plans for you, although I do not know the full extent of them. I have a feeling that the universe will change soon. This will be the last you will see of me, but the genesong I give to you will be my parting gift. I have faith in your abilities. Use it wisely. Now, prepare yourself.", the Cartographer said.

Shepard's mind left the Domain and he was back in Saren's base, still touching the pillar. He almost let go when suddenly a blue column of light covered him. He felt a rush like he had never felt in his life. It was like his mind suddenly felt it was moving at relativistic speeds. His feet levitated just above the ground as the rush continued.

Garrus saw it happen and ran towards him

"Shepard!", he said.

Just as he reached Shepard, the energy beam stopped. Shepard fell to the ground with a mighty thud. Garrus knelt and helped Shepard up, although the Spartan didn't need it. He stood up to his full height and took a step forward, but was off balance. He caught himself and stood back up. His suit was smoking and he was mildly dizzy from the ordeal. After a few seconds of waiting the dizziness went away.

Garrus gave Shepard a concerned look.

"Are you okay? What happened?", he asked.

Shepard looked at his hands and moved each of his fingers. Then he took off his helmet and rubbed his face. The cuts and scrapes were gone, along with any scars he had. He wasn't sure what to say. It was an indescribable feeling. He didn't know precisely what had just happened. All he knew is that he felt different somehow. He felt like

he was more than what he was before. Like some great power that had always been within him had awakened.

"I don't know. Come, we must get moving.", Shepard said.

The two of them took a left and continued down the hallway.

Shepard and Garrus entered a new room. This one was made of a similar black metal as the previous one, but it was circular in shape. There was a holotank in the center of the room. Shepard walked over to it to investigate when suddenly a massive red hologram took shape on the holotank. It was a large cuttlefish creature. Both Garrus and Shepard recognized it immediately. It was the Sovereign.

Shepard took off his helmet and clipped it to his waste. He gave a defiant stare to the hologram.

"What is this? A VI interface of the Sovereign?", Garrus asked.

Shepard struggled to grasp the new memories and information given to him by the Cartographer. He knew there was more to this hologram. The Cartographer had given him that knowledge. He focused on the new part of his mind given to him by the Cartographer. After a couple seconds he finally managed to calm his mind enough to draw information from it.

"No. It's a Reaper.", Shepard said.

The hologram subtly acknowledged this with a slight movement, almost imperceptible unless you were looking.

"Creatures of chaos, your species foolish choices have come to an end. You have wasted your chance. Now you will be cast down and a new contender will take your place.", the hologram said.

Garrus was mesmerized by the sight. This hologram held a sense of supernatural awe. Somehow its presence had an impact greater than its words. The mind they were standing in front of seemed older than the stars themselves. For the first time in a long while, Garrus felt afraid. It was not a healthy fear that helped self preservation or a silly fear that children had. It was true terror. It was the terror one feels when one recognizes something that could very well end his existence.

Then Shepard looked at him. Though the Spartan's visor shielded his face, somehow Garrus felt he was giving him a look of encouragement. It was a look that said "Don't fear. You are stronger than terror." Suddenly he felt his will strengthen. He no longer felt the overwhelming terror that gripped him only a few seconds earlier. He felt resolve.

Garrus stepped a little closer to the hologram.

"What do you mean chance?", Garrus said.

The Reaper hologram continued to ominously float, then responded in what would have been a terrifyingly deep voice were it not for his force of will.

"For thousands of years your civilization has reigned. Conflict after conflict you have weathered, each action taken revealing more about you. Time and again you were tested. Time and again you failed. For this you will not be spared. Your civilization has had its time. You will be harvested to maintain the cycles until a worthy guardian comes. The Mantle will have a master. You will not be it. I am Sovereign, the herald of your doom. You will bow before my might and succumb as I and my brethren cleanse this cycle of all life. Thousands will be indoctrinated. Brother will fight brother. Your end is nearing. You were not worthy to bear the Mantle, but you are worthy of joining our ranks. This is your fate.", Sovereign said.

Then, the hologram turned and faced Shepard.

"Your time is coming to an end as well. We have seen your civilization. We have seen your dominance. We are a monument to all your sins. We will come in such numbers that our shadows will cast eternal night on your worlds. Your technology will not save you. Your armies will flee in terror at our sight, and your most loyal officers will betray you. Soon, you will be harvested and the cycles will begin anew in your galaxy. Our power is beyond comprehension. You will fall.", Sovereign said.

Shepard stepped closer to the hologram and removed his helmet.

"No. Our time is far from over, but yours is finished. We will not bow down to you or flee in terror. We will not sit idly by while you harvest our worlds to fuel your insane obsessions. You have seen my face. Know this: By the time this is over, it will be me you will fear, not we fearing you! You will remember my face as we tear your corpse apart piece by piece and toss it into the sun. We will not fall. In the end, the Reapers will be nothing more than scrap metal. This is your fate. We will beat you.", Shepard said.

There was a brief pause that felt like an eternity.

"You will try."

Then the hologram disappeared.

"What was that? Sovereign didn't make any sense.", Garrus said in confusion.

Shepard put his helmet back on and readied his weapons.

"I'll explain later. Right now we have a job to do.", Shepard said.

The two of them went for the next door. Shepard tried his Spartan Vision again, but it still didn't work. There was no way of knowing what was on the other side. Shepard took position next to the door frame for a breaching position while Garrus readied his rifle. Garrus nodded to Shepard. Shepard raised three fingers for a synchronized countdown.

Three, two, one.

Shepard kicked in the door with all his strength and went through first with Garrus right behind him. They found themselves on a

rooftop overlooking the battlefield. Then they finally saw their prize. Saren was walking towards a shuttle that had arrived on the rooftop. He was accompanied by two Asari commandos. Shepard immediately cloaked and Garrus tossed an overload charge at one of the Asari. The charge dropped her shields and Garrus killed her with a headshot. The other commando turned and prepared a biotic blast, but was promptly stabbed by a cloaked Shepard. He then tossed a plasma grenade into the shuttle, disabling it. Shepard lunged towards Saren only to be batted away by a biotic field. His body was slammed into a nearby wall so hard that it became embedded within.

"I see you finally found me, Garrus.", Saren said as he slowly walked towards him.

Saren was a ghastly sight. His skin was an unnatural shade of gray, even for a Turian. It was almost as if the blood had been drained from his body. Cybernetic implants were visible on his jaws and it was clear that one of his arms was synthetic, grafted on with little care for the body. He looked like a machine, not a Turian. He held that same aura of terror that the Reaper hologram did.

Garrus raised his rifle. He wasn't afraid. He took a shot at Saren's head, but it was absorbed by a kinetic barrier. Saren tossed a powerful biotic field in Garrus's direction. The field caught him and flung him into the wall. Garrus prepared for the worst, but Saren simply walked over to him. He was not armed with any weapon. Only his biotic might protected him. Garrus gave Saren a defiant gaze. Despite being pinned to the wall, for some reason he felt more courageous than ever.

"The Reapers won't win. You're on the wrong side of this. They'll enslave us all. Tell me, why did you hold the Covenant back?", Garrus said.

Saren shook his head.

"I held them back because I wanted you to feel what you will feel if you oppose me when the Reapers come. That feeling of total helplessness, the feeling of coming so close to winning only to be beaten back with ease. You don't understand what is happening. My work is saving the galaxy. We cannot defeat the Reapers. It is inevitable that they will arrive. When they do, we can either be their slaves or their fodder. My work will preserve us. When they arrive, they will see us as a tool, not a threat. They are machines. If we are a threat, they will treat us like a threat. They will annihilate us, and we will be unable to stop them. However, if we are tools, we will be spared because we are useful. No machine destroys what it can use. Our cycle has failed their test. However, the Reapers may find use for us in the next if we submit instead of rebel. We may be the ones choosing who bears the Mantle. None understand this, but I do. We must submit, or we will die, just as the Protheans did before us.", Saren argued.

Garrus looked directly into Saren's glowing synthetic eyes and scowled. The person he wanted so desperately to kill was only an arm's length away, yet he still couldn't reach him. Garrus glanced over to the wall where Shepard was embedded with his peripheral vision. He realized that Shepard wasn't there. He was probably coming around for an attack. He just had to keep Saren talking.

"So many worlds attacked, so many lives destroyed, all so you can prove your worth to the Reapers? You aren't worth anything to them! You're just another one of their pawns. As soon as they're finished using you to weaken our defenses, they're going to come in and harvest us anyway! Can't you see that? Or are you just as indoctrinated as those brave Turians you captured and experimented on like animals? You're already a slave, you just don't know it. Now you will die.", Garrus said.

Saren smirked and looked as if he was going to make a smart remark when Shepard uncloaked and jabbed a knife into Saren's neck. The Turian screamed in agony and collapsed to his knees. Shepard yanked the knife back out and watched Saren fall to the ground, dead. Garrus and Shepard stood over the body for a moment, basking in the glow of victory. He was dead. The menace was dead. After so many people dead, the monster was gone. However, the elation Garrus expected wasn't there. Somehow, the victory seemed hollow. He began to walk away when Saren suddenly inhaled deeply. He slammed both Saren and Garrus with a biotic attack that just barely missed Garrus and almost flung Shepard off the roof and onto the deserted battleground below.

Saren laughed for a moment as Garrus and Shepard got back up.

"You will have to do better than that to kill me, human. The Reapers have given me many gifts. Did you believe that I was not your equal? Did you really think that no one could threaten you? I am disappointed. I thought a Spartan such as you would be beyond such a foolish idea as invincibility. I know who you are. Now you will see the power of the Reapers, and you will obey.", Saren said.

Shepard hopped back on his feet and got into a fighting stance.

"Never."

Shepard spammed bullets at Saren, each one weakening the biotic field protecting the rogue spectre. Garrus took advantage of this and took a shot at Saren with his sniper rifle. It did not pierce the barrier, but weakened it. Shepard leaped into the air at heights which would have been impossible without armor and continued to shoot, but Saren lowered his mass and stepped out of the way before Shepard landed on him. He dashed towards Garrus and gave him a biotically charged punch. The force of the punch dented Garrus's armor and knocked him back. Garrus responded with a shot from his sniper rifle. The round missed Saren's head by a centimeter, but it bought Garrus time to move further away.

Meanwhile, Shepard primed two plasma grenades and tossed them on either side of Saren. He then sprinted towards the rogue spectre at sixty miles per hour, shoulder first. Saren had nowhere to go, except forwards. He decreased his mass and ran towards Shepard at speeds so fast he appeared only as a blur. The MJOLNIR-armored Spartan collided with the mass-reduced rogue Spectre in a crash that shook Shepard all the way down to his metal bones. Muscles and flesh tore in his shoulder and arm. The Medigel conduits in his body were already dispatching the regenerative substance into his bloodstream to dull the pain and repair the damage. The force of Saren's attack was so great that it put a sizeable dent in Shepard's armor. However, the damage was not totally one sided. Despite Saren's Reaper augmentations, the impact of hitting the MJOLNIR armor was like

running into a concrete wall at high speed. He coughed in pain as he felt his chest. His chest armor was caved in and his ribcage had collapsed.

Garrus saw his chance. He zeroed in with his sniper rifle and took a shot at Saren's head. The bullet was simply stopped by a biotic barrier. Garrus gnashed his sharp teeth. The "gifts" the Reapers gave him had greatly strengthened his biotic powers. It seemed like no matter how many times he tried sniping the rogue Spectre, his biotic fields would stop the bullet. The only way to fight him was in hand to hand combat, and that was Shepard's domain. Who happened to be down at the moment. He was getting back up, but he needed time or Saren was going to flay him alive.

Garrus sighed and gripped his sniper rifle like a staff. It was a hardy weapon and it would make a decent makeshift melee weapon for the time being. He fell back on his close quarters combat experience and charged Saren. Saren saw Garrus coming in his peripheral vision and swung a biotic punch at him. Garrus ducked just in time and slammed the butt of his rifle into Saren's wounded chest. Saren screamed in agony and gave Garrus a kick to the chest, knocking him away.

By now Shepard was back up. He drew his pistol only to find it too damaged to fire. Instead, he drew his knife and held it in his left hand while his right arm healed. He took a swipe at Saren, but it only managed to give a superficial wound. Now both Garrus and Shepard were on him. In a blaze of movement that would have been impossible for a mere organic, Saren countered and dodged both Garrus and Shepard's attacks while Reaper nanites healed his ribcage. The flurry of speed made him seem more machine than organic, blocking the high speed attacks from Shepard and the more concentrated attacks from Garrus.

It seemed as if he could keep this up indefinitely. However, Garrus continued to press the attack. In such close quarters Saren couldn't use any of his more powerful ranged attacks. That would buy them some time. Finally, Saren made a mistake. He left his left side unguarded for a second to deal with Garrus. For any normal combatant, it would have been impossible to take advantage of this window. However, Shepard had Spartan Time on his side. The adrenaline pumping through him reduced perceived time to a crawl. He took his knife and slashed a gash across Saren's chest. Saren clutched his chest, leaving him open for attack. Garrus went for the killing blow, but miraculously Saren got up. The rogue spectre reached deep within and unleashed a biotic blast that cleared just enough room for him to escape the duo's relentless onslaught.

He limped towards the edge of the rooftop while clutching his chest and breathing heavily. A floating platform that he called some time ago arrived and he stepped onto it. His body was a total wreck. His chest had a slash across it, his ribs were collapsed. The knife wound in his neck was already scabbed through the healing power of nanites. Despite all the attacks, he was still alive. He knelt on one knee and gave Garrus one last look, straight in the eyes. No words needed to be spoken. Garrus understood completely.

The eyes were saying "This isn't over."

Garrus raised his sniper rifle and took one more shot, but like all

the others it was absorbed by the seemingly impenetrable biotic barrier being generated. Shepard almost tossed a grenade, but he couldn't throw it before the platform floated off. Garrus and Shepard lowered their weapons. Both were too stunned to speak. The frustration was almost too great for Garrus to bear. They were so close, yet he slipped away. Now there was no telling how long it would take for them to fight again. They just lost their best chance at killing him.

Shepard saw a different story from the encounter. The Reapers were a greater threat than he realized. Before, it seemed as if they were untouchable. The UNSC Normandy, the greatest ship in the galaxy with the most powerful soldiers on board. Nothing could beat them. Not the Geth, not the Krogan. Not Saren. Now, it was all too clear that even he had bought into this delusion. This enemy was not like the petty Krogan street thug or the Heretic Geth. They were a true threat. They were like the Sangheili. Deep inside, Shepard knew that they were far worse.

"He got away.", Garrus said angrily.

Shepard shook his head.

"He didn't get away. As long as he's alive, we'll keep hunting.", Shepard said quietly.

__But __can __we __get __him __before __the __Reapers __start __hunting __us__?_ , Shepard thought.

A voice deep in his subconscious whispered in his mind.

__They __already __are__._

* * *

><p>**Author's Note**

Sorry for the long wait everyone. I decided not to post this chapter until I saw Halo 4. So, now things have changed in a big way. We now know what the Reapers are like and why they pose a threat. Reapers in this fic are going to be much more like the eldritch abominations they should have been in Mass Effect. They can do more than indoctrinate. Anything made by the Reapers has an aura that will grip anyone who sees it in near crippling fear. Looking at one too long might render you insane. The Forerunners were immune to this obviously, but everyone else isn't. Only those with unbreakable resolve and powerful will can overcome the Reaper's effects, like Garrus or Shepard. The genesong allows Shepard to spread this power to anyone near him and render them immune to indoctrination.

I thought it would be a good way to make the Reapers a potent threat while dealing with how Shepard never got indoctrinated despite spending all that time around Reapers.

Also, you know how I said next chapter would be an interquel? Yeah, sorry about that. It's still going to be Battle of Virmire. I didn't want to wait any longer to publish this one. I hope you enjoyed this chapter and I'll get the next one out soon.

20. Rewrite Announcement

Hey everyone. As you may have noticed, I haven't published a chapter in a while. There is a reason for this. I am not content. The first chapters of this are not very good, as some reviewers have pointed out. A big reason for this is that at the time I didn't really know what I was doing. This is the first major fanfic project I've done, so it is a fairly new experiment for me. I have no outline for the story, and so far I've just been writing willy nilly with no real direction. I don't even have an ending.

This is not conducive to good writing. I want to write a good fanfic, not just write garbage. As such, I have decided that I am going to rewrite this fic. Professional writers do this all the time, and if they do it there is no shame in me doing it as well. Treat this as a first draft rather than a final draft. I am going to take some time off to get some notes in order and actually plan out the story. Before I do that, I would appreciate if those of you who are still following this will review and tell me overall what you liked about this draft and what you didn't like so I can improve on the story.

I appreciate the support all of you have given me. The positive reviews kept me going and the negative reviews told me what I did wrong. I probably haven't handled criticism as well as I should have, but there is no point in dwelling on that. I'll just have to do better next time. Once again, thank you for your support and I hope you'll follow the rewrite as well.

Until then, CodeRubicon.

P.S. I am also looking for a regular beta reader. PM me if you are interested, I would be very grateful.

End
file.